

things you should probably know before reading this work of fan fiction.

Spoilers for the first four Harry Potter books. I have read OOTP, but this idea predated that, and although I might pull certain things from that book, this story deals with events that took place the summer before fifth year. So, basically, fifth year didn't happen.

This is not meant to be a prediction of canon. There is no way that this would ever really happen in JK's books. I know this, but my imagination got carried away.

This is not a romance fic. I don't really know if there will be any pairing with Harry right now, but I will say that if I do, the only one that I feel I could realistically write would be Harry/Ginny. I do not usually like Harry/Original Character fics, so I won't write one, and I can't really see Harry with any other canon characters. So, that one is up in the air, but romance is not the focus of this fic. There will be no slash relationships in this fic.

I am an American, and although I am trying very hard to keep this British, it's quite possible that I'll slip up. Feel free to let me know if anything real obvious shows up, and I'll probably change it. That being said, I'm sticking to the American spelling of words just for my own sanity and the sake of my Americanized spell checker.

Lastly, I am trying to spell magical words right, but as I am probably the only person under twenty that doesn't own the HP books, I'm having to go off of memory and other fan fics. So, once again, just let me know if you catch anything.

GENERAL DISCLAIMER: None of the people, places or things mentioned below are mine. This world and all of the inhabitants belong to JK Rowling, and I am writing this fic purely for enjoyment, not profit. If this idea has been used by another fan fiction author, I apologize, and assure you that I did not intend to copy your work.

Whew, sorry about that. So, on to the story. Please review and give me your opinion of the fic so far. Thanks, krtshadow.

## CHAPTER 1

## Rescue

Sirius Black grimaced as he walked as confidently as possible down the dark, narrow corridors of the infamous Azkaban. He had hoped that he would never be with in ten miles of this place again, and yet, here he was, entering this hellhole again, and by his own violation. Desperate for a reason to get his mind off of the memories of his past, and the even more hideous imaginations of what another innocent being had suffered here, he turned his attention to the people striding along with him in the direction of the high security cells.

Remus Lupin, Sirius's best friend and confidante, looked pale as he glanced at the dirty cells that lined the passageways. Never one to like enclosed spaces, Remus looked like he might be ill, and was probably thinking similar guilty thoughts regarding the boy that they were coming to retrieve. Thoughts that ran along the lines of, 'How could I have been such an idiot?' and 'Merlin, what have we done?' In contrast, the man that walked on the other side of Sirius merely looked calm and composed, as Albus Dumbledore almost always did. Noticeable to those who knew him, however, was the lack of the customary twinkle in his eyes, and the addition of yet another crease to his forehead.

These men could only hope that they were not too late. Yet, they feared the worst. Would six years in Azkaban break Harry Potter the way that five confrontations with the Dark Lord had not? Sirius had survived twice that long, but Harry had not had the shelter of an animagus form to hide from the dementors in. Harry had had no protection, and likely had worse memories than the average Azkaban convict. This mistake could cost the Light everything.

And what a mistake it had been. Three weeks after the end of his fourth year, it had been discovered that Harry had been missing for two days, and it had seemed that he had voluntarily left his relative's house. He had shown up at the first battle between light and dark forces, and nothing had been the same since. For the last meeting between The Boy Who Lived and The Dark Lord Who Killed had ended with a battlefield strewn with dead, magically drained light side witches and wizards. All of the evidence had shown that Harry's wand

had unloosed the curse that had mowed down over one hundred and fifty people. The spell used was one of great darkness, and the fact that it had seemingly knocked Voldemort for a temporary loop did not excuse its use. Even Dumbledore himself had looked at Harry in horror as he had believed that Harry must have learned the spell from a book that Harry had gotten from the restricted section with the invisibility cloak the headmaster himself had given the boy. The incriminating book had been found in with Harry's school things, a marker at the page that the spell was on.

Harry had been placed in Azkaban not twenty four hours after he had been retrieved from the battlefield where he hadn't been recognized by anyone until after the battle was over. Any light side witnesses to the events of the fight were dead. Harry had collapsed into a brief coma which had probably been just fatigue, but could have also been the exhaustion that was customary after usage of such a blatantly evil spell. The ministry had been terrified that Harry would either join Voldemort or be his successor. The Order of the Phoenix, lead by Dumbledore, had concurred. Harry had woken up in a cell.

These three men would never forgive themselves.

The following five years had been relatively peaceful. There had been rumors that informed Dumbledore that Voldemort had been severely injured by the spell supposedly cast by Harry and was using his recuperation time to regroup and plan further destruction. The Order used this time to recruit and plan for the coming war. If any of Harry's former friends and family thought of him, it was privately and with great sorrow that such a promising young man could turn so evil so quickly.

Then, in the last eleven months, Voldemort had slowly been regaining his former status. Well-planned attacks were very successful and the light side was having difficulties adequately defending itself against the encroaching evil. Wormtail had been captured soon after Harry's incarceration, leading to the freedom of Sirius Black and the ministries late realization that the threat of Voldemort was real. However, it wasn't until the capture of one Adrian Silene, Wormtail's successor for the coveted position of Voldemort's right hand and

most frequently tortured servant, that the truth about Harry had surfaced.

Not twenty-four hours ago, the Order had been interrogating Silene under veritaserum, and had, to their horror, learned the extent of their foolishness. Harry had been taken from his relatives' house, not by force, but by a sizable deposit into the account of Vernon Dursley. Dursley had simply handed the boy over, uncaring as to his fate. The book had been easily planted in Harry's room, and the unconscious, but unharmed boy had been taken to the battlefield. Because of the similarities between the brother wands, Voldemort was able to use Harry's wand to cast his evil spell. Leaving Harry unconscious and surrounded by the dead, he had left, trusting in the ministry and the Order to finish his work for him. They had done so with a vengeance, and Harry's side of the story was never heard.

Silene was unaware of the real reasons behind Voldemort's five year silence, but it hadn't been because he was recuperating from any spell. Voldemort seemed to have taken previous lessons in trust to heart, and no one, not even the few spies that the Order managed to keep active, knew much of what the Dark Lord had been up to. The Order was only able to guess at what secret evil he had been planning during this time.

With this testimony, pieces began to fall into place. Harry would not have been able to learn that complex of a spell in such a short amount of time. Not only that, but his guilt over Cedric's death should have pointed out to those who knew him that Harry Potter would never sacrifice human life to gain his goals. The fact that no one had even bothered to ask Harry his version of the events came to light and the puzzle was complete.

Horried, Dumbledore had barely taken the time to make sure that Silene was placed in a cell before firecalling Sirius, Remus, Hermione, and the Weasleys. Sirius had merely sat in growing horror as the truth about his godson washed over him. Remus had shared similar feelings of guilt, feeling that once again, he had failed to put the evidence together the right way, and helped condemn another innocent young man to Azkaban. Hermione and Ron were stunned, and with the Weasleys, demanded that Harry be released at once.

So, this was why these men had entered this place of horror, one returning, one visiting again, and one for the first time. The dementors had joined Voldemort nearly a month ago, and aurors now stalked the halls of the fortress prison instead. A few pointed questions led to answers that none of the men wanted to hear. According to the head auror, no one in the high security block was sane. It didn't matter, though, Harry Potter was leaving this place tonight, sane or not.

They finally came to a halt before one cell, seemingly no different from its neighbors, although it had one major thing that set it apart from its fellows. The man inside was innocent. Ignoring the moans from the man in the cell to the left and the wide eyed, non blinking stare of the woman in the cell to the left, Dumbledore lifted his wand and spoke the words that unlocked the cell door. Then, unconsciously holding his breath, Sirius stepped into the cell. "Harry?" His voice cracked slightly as he took in the drab room that had held his godson prisoner for way too long. Remus and Dumbledore followed silently. Their eyes were immediately drawn to the rough bed, finding it empty. Then Sirius moved quickly to a corner, where a young man sat slumped against the wall. "Harry." If he was hoping for a response, he was disappointed, for the rather bedraggled Harry made no noise, no movement, nothing at all.

Sirius seemed frozen at the sight of the mess that was Harry, and Remus didn't look much better, so Dumbledore moved towards the young man and couched beside him. "Harry, can you hear me?" No response. "Harry, we know what really happened. We know you're innocent. Harry?" Nothing. The headmaster looked disappointed at Harry's lack of response, while the two other occupants of the room looked downright traumatized. Dumbledore gently touched Harry's arm and managed to pull him to his feet. He stood, swaying weakly, and then started to slide back down again. Remus moved forward, and slung an arm around Harry's waist, supporting his slight frame easily. Dumbledore placed one wrinkled finger under Harry's chin and pushed it up into the light.

All three men slumped slightly. Harry Potter's green eyes, once so full of light, held no spark of recognition or life. Sirius choked back a sob

as he moved to support Harry's other side. "Come on, Harry, let's take you home."

As they carefully picked their way out of the prison, all three men desperately hoped that Harry's condition was not permanent. If it was, their own stupidity may have doomed not only Harry to a life of insanity, but the wizarding world to a dictatorship under Voldemort.

None of them saw the slight glint in Harry Potter's eyes as they passed the gate, nor the twitch of his lips as they boarded the boat that would return them to the mainland. They believed that his blank eyes equaled blank mind. He let them. It was better that way, in his opinion. They would find out in due time, but until then the state of Harry Potter's mind remained his own well kept secret.

TBC...

Reviews would be appreciated. Thanks for reading!

## DISCLAIMER IN CHAPTER 1

### CHAPTER 2

#### Disappointments

The Weasley household was in utter turmoil. Not that that was all that unusual, but this spate of activity seemed even more frantic and hurried than normal. Nearly all the Weasley's and associated significant others were present. Missing were Percy and Penelope, due to Percy's ministry job, he now lived in London and rarely returned home, and Charlie, who had been unable to get away from his dragons until the following day. The house had been cleaned top to bottom at least three times, due to the nervous energy that abounded in the house, and Molly was now polishing the clock for the fourth time.

Ron was so uptight that he was in the process of losing a game of chess to Hermione, who hadn't even noticed that she was winning yet. Both of Harry's former best friends, now romantically involved with each other, were nervous to the point of being near tears. They knew that the next weeks would be difficult no matter what condition Harry was in. Guiltily, Ron suppressed the thought that it might be easier if Harry was insane, then no one would have to deal with the anger a sane Harry was sure to hold for them all. Hermione could only focus on the fact that the boy that she had once thought of as a brother and best friend almost certainly hated her now. The fact that he had due cause to do so only made the situation worse.

Suddenly, a series of popping sounds penetrated the bustle and like magic the room became dead still. The four new occupants of the living room found themselves the center of attention. Only three of them seemed to notice at all. Harry, still in between and being supported by Sirius and Remus, stared only at the floor.

Ron was the first to find his voice. "Harry?" Hermione bit back a sob at the utter lack of response. Ron continued, a note of desperation entering his voice. "Hello?" Turning to Sirius, he was horrified at the look of helplessness in Harry's godfather's eyes. "Has he said... anything?"

Dumbledore answered for the still stricken Sirius. "No. There has been no response. He doesn't seem to even recognize us. All of you should try to talk to him over the next couple of days. Who knows what will spark his mind into remembering?"

Arthur Weasley stepped forward resolutely. "We'll do whatever he needs. Should we floo in a mediwizard?"

Remus slowly lowered Harry into a sitting position on the couch. His head raised slightly in the process and everyone held their breath, hoping for a reaction to his surroundings. None came, and Harry settled his gaze on a knot in the wood floor and showed no sign of moving his eyes any time soon. Dumbledore looked sadly at the broken man. "No, it is better to keep this among people who know him. I spoke with Madam Pomfrey and her suggestion is that he never be alone at any time, and that you try to treat him as normally as possible. School is out in two weeks, and if at that time there is no improvement, I shall take him to Hogwarts and show him some of the sites there that he may remember fondly. Other than that, we can only hope."

Bill looked unsure. "Maybe St. Mungo's would be better..."

Sirius shook his head violently. "If this is mental, and it looks like it is, there's no potion for it. What he needs is familiar surroundings." His voice trailed off and he added softly, "I should know." The room fell silent again, heartbroken that this could happen not once, but twice.

Remus spoke up for the first time, trying to direct attention away from his friend. "His body seems to be in decent shape, considering. Better than you were, Padfoot."

Sirius moved closer and looked his godson over for a while. "You're right, Moony, he's in good condition. I think that a good meal or two will help him a lot, but he could be much worse off." Sirius grimaced and faced the assembled group. "We are going to get him back. I will do whatever it takes." Determination was evident in every line of his body. Murmurs of assent echoed around the circle. "Arthur, Molly, are you sure you can put up with us here?"



Molly looked absolutely horrified at the thought of Harry anywhere else. "As Albus said, this is the place that he was at the most, next to Hogwarts. Since he can't be adequately watched there, this is the best place for him. We certainly have room for all of you, yes, you too, Remus, and there will be nothing more said on the issue. Now, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, go fix him a nutritional potion. Arthur, you and I will get his room fixed to Dumbledore's specifications, Remus, you and Sirius see that he gets cleaned up. The rest of you redheads clear out until tomorrow." Molly's take charge attitude was a relief in the tension filled atmosphere. "Well, what are you waiting for? Go on!"

They went. Ginny was pale, but moved determinedly towards the kitchen. Hermione was in tears and Ron carefully tried to comfort her while dealing with his own horror at seeing his once best friend with nothing but blankness in his eyes. Dumbledore led the way to a central bedroom, and informed Molly that the room should be emptied of everything but necessities and objects that couldn't be harmful. He also suggested that a comfortable chair or two be placed in the room for those who would be sitting up with Harry in the night. The aged headmaster then left, needing to get back to the school. Bill, Fleur, Fred, Angelina and George, the only other Weasleys still in the room, moved out the front door, murmuring quietly about Harry's condition.

Sirius sat down next to Harry and gently placed a hand on his back. "Harry, can you get up for me?" Harry continued to stare at the wood knot in silence, seemingly mesmerized by the grain of the wood. Really not wanting to have to force him, Sirius tried again. "Harry, please. Get up." At the direct order, Harry slowly stood to his feet. Remus stepped back in surprise and exchanged glances with the stunned Sirius.

Remus decided to try his luck. "Harry, sit down." Once again, Harry blindly obeyed. "Yes, well, this is nice, I suppose."

Sirius nodded, not exactly sure what this meant as to the state of Harry's mind. But at least there was some kind of brain function going on. "Harry, get up again, please." Harry did as he was commanded, swaying slightly as he stood. "Follow me." Sirius supported Harry as they moved slowly up the stairs and into the spacious bathroom, where the two friends managed, using commands and a lot of spells,

to get Harry clean and into new robes. The nutritional potion followed, delivered by Ginny, and then the two men headed their charge towards the bedroom.

The bedroom was pleasantly bright and comfortably furnished. Molly was still fluffing the pillows and fixing random things around the room when Remus, followed obediently by Harry, with Sirius bringing up the rear, entered the room. Remus exchanged glances with the other adults in the room and then he and Molly exited silently. Sirius would have went right through the roof had it been suggested than anyone but him take the first shift of Harry-sitting.

Sirius sat down in one of the chairs, and waited, curious to see what Harry would do in a strange room without orders. He was feeling a little more hopeful ever since Harry had responded to his command in the living room. It seemed like Harry was still in there somewhere, and Sirius' fears of Harry being mentally blank were almost totally gone. If he was still with it enough to understand what 'Take a bath.' meant, his mind couldn't be totally ruined.

Harry just stood in the center of the room for a while, looking at nothing in particular. When he finally did move, Sirius had to stop himself from jumping out of the chair in surprise. Harry didn't seem to notice his start of surprise, though, and Sirius continued to watch with bated breath as he moved slowly towards the corner of the room. Sirius frowned slightly, what could possibly be attracting his attention there? Then his eyes slid shut in defeat and sadness as Harry sank down into a ball on the floor and leaned his head up against the wall. The bed either hadn't appealed to him, he hadn't noticed it, or worse, he thought that it wasn't for him. "You can sleep in the bed if you want to, Harry." Since this wasn't an order, there was once again absolutely no response from the huddled figure on the floor.

Sirius decided not to force him to move to the bed, perhaps it was better to let him adjust on his own. "I'm really sorry about... about everything, Harry. I..." Sirius ran a hand through his shoulder length hair, unsure of what to say or even if Harry was hearing him. "...I really just seem to foul everything up. So, I don't know if you can even understand what I'm saying, but I think that you should know that I'm sorry, and if you're in there and want to talk to me, I'd be glad

to listen, but if you don't that's fine too, and I just wish... I just hope your going to be OK, Harry. Your father would have killed me... Lily would have tortured me... Merlin, I'm rambling." Sirius' voice subsided into nothingness and he glanced over at Harry to find his eyes closed.

Sirius settled in for a long night of watching Harry sleep and praying to anybody who would listen that his godson would be fine.

His godson, not nearly as asleep as Sirius thought he was, wondered what the next day would hold. He also fiercely resisted the urge to get up and punch his godfather in the nose. Being sorry was nice and all, but really didn't change anything. Nothing could do that. After a little contemplation on how enjoyable it would be to literally throw Sirius out of the room, Harry decided that, tempting though it may be, it was not the best course of action.

He did file the idea away for later, though.

COMING SOON: Our favorite dark lord learns of Harry's whereabouts, and... Harry finally speaks?

Reviews, comments, encouragement and criticisms are appreciated. THANKS!

NOTE: Because of this fic, I am interested in other similar stories. If you happen to be leaving a review, and know of a Harry-in-Azkaban type fic that you can recommend, let me know. I also really like to read well-done Powerful! Harry fics. (this might be a clue as to the future of this fic... or not... who knows? ; ) Thanks! -krtshadow

## CHAPTER 3

### Nightmare

Sirius snapped awake with a start, causing a jolt of pain to radiate through his cramped muscles. Remus, sitting opposite him, grimaced in sympathy as Sirius rubbed his neck ruefully. "I imagine you wish you'd gone to bed like I told you when I came in to relieve you, Padfoot. I wasn't aware that human anatomy could bend in that direction."

"Yeah, well, must be the dog in me." Suddenly remembering the reason why he had opted to sleep in a chair, Sirius frantically scanned the room. "Where...?" He relaxed as he noticed Harry in the corner, seemingly unmoved from the night before.

"Calm down, he woke up about an hour ago. I think, anyway. I hardly even noticed, just happened to look up and see that his eyes were open. He hasn't moved. I was about to try to talk to him, but I didn't want to wake you up." Remus rose from his chair and walked closer to Harry who was staring at the white ceiling. It was rather disconcerting to see, as it looked as if he was looking at a spot or something, but nothing was there. The werewolf carefully knelt near Harry and spoke quietly. "Harry? Can you hear me?" Ignoring the lack of response, he continued. "I know you're in there, Harry. Please try to communicate with us. We won't leave you again, I swear it. Marauder's Honor. Do you remember the Marauder's Map? Your father's nickname was Prongs, Harry. He was a stag animagus and..."

Sirius had to leave the room as the emotions that he'd been trying to hold back suddenly came to the front. He knew that Remus was doing the right thing, that speaking to Harry of things he might remember was the best treatment for his malady, but it hurt to see Harry have to be told details that he should have known already. He cursed himself up and down. He should have trusted Harry more, he shouldn't have been so easily convinced, even if all of the evidence had pointed to the guilty verdict. He, of all people, should have known better. A hand on his shoulder startled him out of his self-flagellation and he looked up to see Ron, complete with dark circles under his

eyes, a tray balanced in one hand. It must be Harry's breakfast. "Are you all right, Sirius?" Ron winced at the withering glance that Sirius sent his way. "No, of course you're not. Umm, I'm here to take my turn, is it all right to just go on in?"

Sirius nodded. "Yeah, but don't expect much, Ron, Moony was trying to talk to him, but there was just nothing going on." Ron took a shaky breath, nodded, and pushed the door open. Sirius caught one last glance of his godson, still on the floor, before the door closed again. He slid down the wall to rest his head on his knees, thinking gloomy thoughts and imagining just what James would be doing to him if he was still alive. Skinning him alive was one possibility that immediately came to mind. Goring him to death with his antlers was another.

Ron carefully put the tray on the bedside table, listening to Remus' rather one-sided dialogue with the motionless Harry. "...seeing Hogwarts again. I imagine you'll get to go yourself in a couple of weeks, Harry. School's almost out, and once all of the students go home for the holidays, we'll take you to see the Great Hall and some of the other places that you might remember." Remus looked up and saw Ron, nodded his acknowledgment of the passing of shifts and turned his attention back to Harry. "Well, Harry, I think it's time for your breakfast, and I'm going to go downstairs to get mine. Stand up, Harry."

Once again, at the direct order, Harry obliged. Ron gasped, and Remus explained. "He'll obey a order, but nothing else, so if you need him to do something, just tell him. We are trying to avoid making him do anything more than necessary, though."

Ron nodded, and spoke as calmly as he could to the blank eyed man who stood silently in the corner as if awaiting instructions. "Harry, come over here and sit down." Harry complied, and Ron took the cover off of the tray and continued. "Eat the food, Harry." Harry numbly picked up a fork and did so.

Remus ran a hand through his graying hair and sighed. "Well, good luck, Ron. Remember, keep it as upbeat as possible, and don't let it get you down." He clapped Ron on the shoulder. "We'll just keep

going until we get somewhere." With those words, he exited the room, nearly stumbling on Sirius in the process.

Feeling slightly better at Remus' encouraging words, Ron turned back to Harry who was methodically cleaning his plate. Sitting on the bed, the redhead watched him for a moment and then, working up his courage, ventured into the world of talking to an utterly unresponsive person. "So, Harry, guess what? The Cannon's might actually have a chance this season. They've just signed a new seeker, not as good as you, but pretty good, and they just had a game against the Falcons earlier this week..."

Ron was replaced by Hermione, who gave way to Molly, who was followed by the twins, who insisted on taking their shift together, mostly so that they could finish each other's sentences. Harry was led around the house, outside, to the makeshift Quidditch pitch and anywhere else anyone could think to go. Charlie arrived at the Burrow and dutifully took his turn, eventually having to be evicted from the room by Sirius. Charlie had the tendency to get rather long-winded about his dragons, and he had been in the middle of reminiscing about the different characteristics of a Hungarian Horntail as compared to a Chinese Fireball when Sirius had finally lost patience with the topic.

Nothing anyone did or said had any effect on the object of their attentions.

Evening had fallen, and Harry was sitting quietly in a corner of the living room, as a somewhat stilted conversation was being held around him. Stilted because at least four people were always watching Harry, who was seemingly content to stare at the third brick in the fifth row from the top of the fireplace. The topic had just moved from the disturbing lack of progress in Harry's situation to the game plan for tomorrow, when to everyone's horror, a peculiar vibrating feeling passed through the room. Everyone knew instantly what had just happened.

One of the wards had fallen.

Perhaps it was unlucky that everyone's gaze was taken away from Harry for a moment, or someone would have noticed a sudden tenseness that permeated his body at the sensation that the falling ward made. Had they been looking, they might have noticed that Harry suddenly didn't look very blank anymore. Dangerous, maybe, but definitely not blank. However, by the time anyone thought to look at Harry again, the mask had been replaced and Harry had resumed his meaningless gaze at the brick.

Around his motionless body, pandemonium erupted. Wands drawn, Sirius, Remus and Ron surrounded Harry and faced outward, ready for attack. The other Weasleys ran to various windows and doors to try to see what was going on outside. Suddenly there was a thump and everyone but Harry whirled to face the fireplace, where someone had just flooed in. Dumbledore stood before the grate, looking grave and dangerous. "It's Voldemort." Those two words caused everyone's heart to sink. How had the dark lord found them so quickly? Once again, Voldemort seemed to be two steps ahead of his opposition.

Options were quickly discussed and discarded. The remaining wards were falling quickly, and the floo connection had been severed only seconds after Dumbledore had arrived. Aurors were supposedly on their way, but it was quite obvious that they would not get there in time, if they showed up at all. Apparation was out of the question, as Voldemort had no doubt erected his own anti-apparation wards around the house. Portkeys were present in almost every person's pocket, but did not work. Voldemort was blocking the paths by some dark magic. In short, the occupants of the Burrow were trapped.

Just then the door blew open with a bang, and the battle began. Dark, hooded figures spilled into the room and began shooting curses in every direction. Noticeably absent was the sound of the unforgivable curses. Voldemort obviously wanted the occupants of the house to be taken alive. Curses began flying from both sides, but one by one, those who fought for the light fell. They fought bravely and ably, but for every death eater that fell, it seemed as if two more took his place. Even Dumbledore himself, although fighting valiantly, took an immobilizing curse in the back as he tried to defend Harry's corner from six death eaters. Finally, the sound of shouted curses and frantic yelling ceased. The floor was littered with bodies from both sides,

with Harry the noticeable exception. He still stood silently in the corner, not moving or breaking his well-kept eye contact with the brick fireplace. Unsure of what to do with him, the death eaters waited for their lord. They did not have long to wait, as the door soon swung open again and Voldemort himself entered the Burrow.

Surveying the wreckage of the Weasley's living room with pleasure, Voldemort waved his wand, binding the unconscious and wounded defenders tightly. He then removed his own fallen, sending them away to be healed. More death eaters filled the room, surrounding the dark lord. Finally, Voldemort waved his wand again and woke the stupified members of the Order from their unnatural slumber. The snake eyed wizard only smiled at their struggles against his unbreakable bonds. There was no doubt that he had won this battle. With one sweep, Voldemort would be able to rid the world of many of his biggest stumbling blocks on the way to his intended world domination.

Voldemort was having a good day. It was about to get better.

The dark lord swept over to where Harry stood silently in the corner, eyes on the floor, shaggy hair mostly obscuring his face. Sirius struggled against his bonds, desperate to do something, anything to protect his godson, but was not able to gain any purchase against the rough ropes. The mass murderer looked his one time opponent up and down. "So, Harry, are you as insane as they think you are?" His mocking voice echoed through the room, sending shivers up and down the backs of those bound.

Harry lifted his head, hair falling back to reveal eyes that resembled ice, they were that cold and hard. Life was in them once again, if you could call it that. To be honest, the light in them resembled death, instead. "Not at all." He paused slightly, and then finished, "My lord."

Sirius managed to sum up the entire light side's thoughts in one whispered expletive.

COMING SOON: Harry is scary and gets rid of people he hates. But who?



Review are appreciated!

## CHAPTER 4

### Power

Voldemort looked at Harry in amusement. "Well, well, well. However did you retain your sanity, Harry Potter?"

Harry's face changed for the first time since he had left his cell in Azkaban. His answer was short, curt and to the point and the anger on his face was easily discernible. "Hate."

Voldemort laughed, a high evil cackle that caused shivers to run down the spine of everyone present. "So, you will join me, take my mark?"

"I will." Harry took a step forward and knelt at the Dark Lord's feet. There was no hesitation in his voice, no pause in his movement. The captives looked on in horror at the sight of The Boy Who Lived joining his previous most hated enemy.

"Do you have any conditions to this obedience? If so, state them now." Voldemort looked quite pleased at the way things were turning out.

Harry raised his head to look him in the eye. "No conditions, my lord, only a request, if it please you."

A ghastly smile spread across the white face above him. "Speak it."

Harry gestured in the direction of the captives. "There are a few that I would... enjoy having a few words with." The tone of his voice left little doubt as to what he meant. For once, there seemed to be emotion in his voice. Eagerness.

At the Dark Lord's chortle of glee and nod of agreement, Harry's eyes turned to the assembled group of trussed up people. "Only one now, Harry, there will be time later." Voldemort's voice sounded like a father remonstrating his overeager child for taking too many pastries at tea.

Sirius had shut his eyes. So that would be how he would die. Killed by his best friend's son. How utterly ironic. Remus just looked on in horror, realizing for perhaps the first time just how much evil their stupidity might have unleashed, what atrocities Harry Potter's powers could be used for. Ron and Hermione just stared, frozen with shock and terror, as their once best friend looked towards them with murder in his eyes. Ginny's face was white and tears were streaming down her face, but she met Harry's cold gaze, obviously determined to die bravely. Dumbledore looked disappointed and sad, his eyes had totally lost their shine, and he stood quietly, awaiting his fate.

Voldemort stood back to watch as Harry rose and moved over to the group. "Here, my boy, you shall need this." He handed Harry his own wand, and continued, voice dripping with malice. "Perhaps your dear, loving, LOYAL Godfather should be the first."

Sirius's eyes shot open at this. Harry stood in front of him, fingering the wand that rested gently in his hand. "With my lord's leave, I prefer him to be last." Sirius saw something that he couldn't interpret enter his godson's eyes.

Voldemort waved his hand. "Whoever you choose."

Harry never took his eyes off of his godfather's face as he snapped the wand out to his side and clearly spoke the words, "Avada Kevadra." There was a flash of green light and Remus Lupin crumbled to the ground. Ignoring Sirius' moan of pain at the fall of his last friend, Harry turned back to the Dark Lord and handed him his wand on bended knee. "Thank you, my lord."

Furious, Sirius shouted. "We should have left you in there!"

Harry shot him a glare that would have melted steel. "Perhaps you should have." Ignoring Sirius' sputter of rage, he dutifully took his place in the line of death eaters.

Triumphant at the sight of the murder done by the Boy Who Lived, Voldemort motioned for Harry to stand slightly behind him and turned his attention back to Dumbledore. "So, Headmaster, you see before you your greatest failure. You will die tonight, and then who will dare

stand against me?" Voldemort laughed insanely for a moment and then answered his own question. "No one, no one at all."

"Do not be so sure, Tom, there will always be those who fight for the light." Dumbledore, although bent with age, did not bow in spirit.

Voldemort's face contorted with fury at the defiant words and he placed his wand directly between Dumbledore's eyes. "CRUCIO!" The aged man visibly braced himself for the pain.

Nothing happened.

Nearly every eye in the building had been awaiting the results of the curse and only one man was not focused on the drama occurring between Dumbledore and Voldemort. This man realized that something was about to happen. Severus Snape, face hidden behind a death eater's mask, watched as Harry Potter's right hand clenched for a moment and then relaxed, releasing a glowing ball of brilliant energy to float an inch from his fingertips. Snape's eyes widened. To be able to do that, and without a wand? Merlin, this was going to be interesting.

Voldemort was staring at his dysfunctional wand in shock. At the hint of movement behind him, he began to turn. Harry took a step forward, the ball of light growing by the second. Harry had just one word to say to the man who had murdered his parents and ruined his life, and he said it with as much contempt as he could muster. "Sucker." Then, blindingly fast, Harry closed the two foot gap in between them and slammed the now head sized ball of light into the white face before him. Voldemort, who was both convinced of Harry's obedience and unnerved by the failure of his wand, had no time to react, no time to defend himself, which was exactly how Harry had wanted it.

The following scene would be forever etched into the minds of every surviving observer. Light began pouring off of Harry, seeping out of his eyes and through his hands. Voldemort had time for one last, drawn out scream before the light totally consumed him. "Nooooooooo." A murky cloud of black rose above his body, only to be eradicated by the light that surrounded it. Finally, Voldemort's limp body dropped to the ground with a thud, obviously lifeless. Harry stood over him,

breathing heavily. Then he turned towards the other occupants of the room. The loyal death eaters raised their wands as one, but Harry moved too quickly, pulling the nearest in front of him and clamping one glowing hand on the death eater's left forearm.

Every servant of Voldemort froze, held captive by something they could not see. Snape, the only one to stay in his original place, couldn't move, but was nearly catatonic with unaccustomed happiness. Potter had killed the Dark Lord. No matter what happened now, the Light was safer than it had been a mere minute ago. Potter himself was dangerous, but it was highly unlikely that one with tendencies to the Dark Arts would be able to control the amount of light magic necessary to use light as a weapon in the manner that Potter had. Contrary to almost every possible scenario he had run through his head when he joined Dumbledore, it looked like for once he had chosen both the right and the winning side.

Then another thought entered the potion master's mind. He just might not survive to enjoy this feeling much longer. Snape watched in utter amazement and growing fear as Harry fell into a heap on the floor behind the death eater he had grabbed. A burning pain in Snape's dark mark accompanied the sight. A flickering, dark green light began to move down the line of frozen Death Eaters, and one by one they crumbled to the floor, limp and unmoving. Snape was at the far end of the room and was able to watch in shock along with the still bound captives as the dark robed figures fell.

Light had totally encircled Harry now, hiding him from view. Snape knew that he was going to die. Somehow, Potter was dealing with the death eaters by tapping into the connection that Voldemort had established through the dark mark. He considered his options, discarding all ideas that came to mind as useless against this power, and then accepted his fate. He had never really expected to survive this conflict. Dying like this was much better than at the hands of an infuriated and betrayed Dark Lord and at least he had the comfort of knowing that he had survived until the end. He watched the spell deal with the man standing next to him and waited for the light to sweep over him.

As the light reached him, he realized that it had not originated from Potter, the taint of the Dark Lord was strong enough to recognize anywhere. Snape allowed himself a snort of contempt, Voldemort had condemned every follower to die if he perished. And these idiots had been stupid enough to be loyal to the murderous fiend. The death of the 'Master' had obviously started a chain reaction that would painfully kill every death eater. It fit, why would Voldemort be so foolish as to let his followers survive if he wasn't there to gather in the rewards of being their master? Snape thought it highly ironic that he was going to die by the hand of a dead man. Then, suddenly, something caught his attention.

Still hate me, Professor? Potter's magic was as recognizable as Voldemort's, his as much light as Voldemort's has been dark. Snape's eyes widened underneath his mask. He wasn't dying and Potter was communicating with him. What on earth? Well, it doesn't really matter anyway.

Snape felt the darker magic begin to leave him as though forced away and a thought burst into his mind. Desperate, he thought as hard as he could at the vanishing presence in his mind. "Draco's light!" The whisper escaped with the thought and Snape could only hope that Potter had understood.

Then, faintly, a response came, a second before the light moved on to the next and last death eater in the room. If you say so...

Another moment passed and Snape was released from the spell that held him motionless, and felt one last flash of intense pain in his arm. He crumpled to the floor from the pain, nearly blacking out, and then managed to regain his senses in time to see the aura of light fade away from the figure in the center of the room.

The room was silent for a long, tense moment. Harry knelt on his hands and knees, head drooping, exhaustion evident in every line of his body. Then, from the wall, Ginny's voice tentatively broke the silence. "H-harry?"

Harry's head snapped up and every conscious occupant of the room could see his eyes, alight with a myriad of emotions, scan the room,

finally resting on Sirius's agonized and confused face for a long second. Then, with a quiet pop, he was gone.

COMING SOON: Snape finds himself in the middle of everything and we meet the Light's other spy.

Remember, I said don't jump to conclusions!! Hey, come back! I'm not through messing with your head yet!! Just kidding, but you'll have to keep reading to understand this fic! I'm trying to keep it real, 'cause in real life, things don't always get explained right after they happen. Also, things are not always as they seem! Reviews are very encouraging and tend to make me write faster. =) Thank you to everyone who has been kind enough to review already. You guys keep me going!!

## CHAPTER 5

### Freedom

The whole room remained frozen for a long moment, every occupant stunned by the events that had just occurred. Snape stood to his feet, garnering a few apprehensive looks from the still bound group. With one fluid motion he removed his mask, a movement that caused a sigh of relief to circle the room as one of the Order's two spies revealed his face. With a wave of his wand, the bonds surrounding the others vanished, and the still surprised witches and wizards broke into confused babble, trying to understand the events of the evening.

Only one person was silent, as Sirius Black dropped to his knees beside the still figure of Remus Lupin. Tears streamed down his face as he gently gathered the smaller man into his arms. Dumbledore moved over beside him and spoke quietly to the grieving man. "Sirius, let's get him back to Hogwarts." With a nod to the rest of the room, Dumbledore apparated himself and the two men out of the room.

The Weasley men were examining the bodies that littered the room. Molly was dealing with a hysterical Hermione and a shaking Ginny. Snape, conscious of a feeling of freedom unlike any he'd had for decades, pulled up the sleeve of his voluminous cloak and gazed at his bare arm. The mark that he'd hated for so long was completely gone, replaced by a red area that was already beginning to fade.

Ignoring the questions and theories of the others in the room, Snape walked out the door, allowing himself a moment to compose himself. Dealing with emotions was not something he liked doing at all, much less doing so in front of Gryffindors and Weasleys to boot. As he stepped over the threshold of the house, he breathed the night air and shut his eyes, relief flooding through him. It was over. Finally over.

A noise to his right caused him to spin around, wand raised by habit. There was no further noise, but investigation was necessary anyway. He carefully picked his way over the clump of rather thorny bushes and parted the branches to peer carefully through. A bunch of robes lay on the ground and it was only after they moved slightly that Snape



realized that there was an occupant of the robes present. He moved closer, wand ready, and pushed the wizard onto his back. "Lumos." He was not prepared for the sight in front of him.

Harry Potter grimaced up at him in the light from his wand "Guess I didn't get very far, huh?" Then Potter's eyes rolled back and he went limp.

Snape announced his dissatisfaction with the situation to the universe at large with a few well-chosen words spoken under his breath. Now what to do? He couldn't just leave him there. Well, technically, he could, but he seemed to now owe yet another life debt to the Potter name, as it was obvious that Harry had intentionally blocked the death spell sent his way as Voldemort's goodbye present to his followers. So, his honor stated that he couldn't just leave him there. Taking him inside was not a very good option, since, defeat of Voldemort or not, he had just killed one of the Order's members. The fact that he'd taken out Voldemort afterwards wouldn't mean much to the Weasleys, who had had entirely too much respect for the werewolf, at least in Snape's opinion. So that was out of the question. The only other place possible would be Hogwarts, but he would have to be careful. If Black saw his godson tonight, with Potter in this weakened condition, Lupin might well have company in death.

This was going to take some Slytherin style planning.

The plan culminated with one Harry Potter hidden in Snape's personal quarters, deep in the dungeons of Hogwarts. Far from dungeon like, Snape's rooms, although rather spare, were well lit and comfortably, if not elegantly, furnished. Harry Potter lay limply a sofa in the corner, totally oblivious to the world, as Snape sat in a chair across the room and pondered. The boy was clearly exhausted, the original burst of magic used to kill Voldemort was of such magnitude that it would have nearly killed any average wizard, even if they were able to do it at all. That Harry was able to do it wandlessly, after being out of Azkaban for less than a week, and then be able to harness and to some extent, control the death spell that had attacked the Death Eaters... well, it defied comprehension. Harry Potter should be dead, totally drained of both magic and life force.

The bloody Boy Who Lived strikes again. Well, it was probably best to get the boy awake reasonably soon. He would need to be at least conscious, since there was doubtless already a search going out for him. Dumbledore would want him under control as soon as possible. Snape contemplated going and telling Albus that the person that they were searching for was residing on his sofa, but decided against it. The war was over, he was now free to make decisions for his own agenda, and it was clear to his analytical Slytherin mind that Harry Potter would soon, if he hadn't already, take from Dumbledore the unspoken title of most powerful wizard alive. The fact that Harry had a perfectly good reason to be angry at most of the wizarding world only made this fact more fascinating. There was no good reason to add to the dislike that Potter already had for his former potions professor.

Snape had very little doubt that Potter would be light until the day that he died, but the acting that he had done earlier that night made it clear that somewhere in that Gryffindor mind lay a dormant Slytherin, and one that engendered Snape's respect. What a marvelous play he'd made. It had been necessary to put Voldemort off of his guard, and had he ever succeeded!

The death of Lupin was the only thing that pulled at Snape's subconscious. That was the only piece that didn't seem to fit. Oh well, he was prepared to assume that that had been a fit of anger, and write it off as that. But, why Lupin and not Black, who had once had the power to hurt Potter far more than anyone else alive? It just didn't follow.

Snape's pondering was interrupted by the slight musical tone that warned him of an approaching visitor to his rooms. He stood, unworried. Only two people had the password necessary to get into his inner sanctum, and if it was Dumbledore, he would likely already be aware of Potter's whereabouts, for there was no other reason to seek Snape out at this point in time. Snape was sure that his side of the story would be needed later on, but surely not this soon.

True to his suspicions, the other possessor of the password entered the room at a dead run. Skidding to a stop at the sight of Snape, the man shoved back the hood of his standard Death Eater garb and

revealed his pale face to the light. Draco Malfoy heaved a sigh of relief at the sight of his mentor. "Bloody hell, Severus, am I glad to see you! What in Merlin's name is going on? The castles in an uproar, I was just the only conscious survivor of a Death Eater meeting, and my dark mark is gone. Please tell me that means what I think it means?" The plea was obvious in his voice.

Snape allowed himself a true smile. "If you think that it means that Voldemort is dead, then you would be correct."

Draco whooped with glee, pumping a fist into the air. Snape's smile broadened at the usually controlled boy's look of joy. Here was yet another who had had no real hope of surviving the war realizing that it was over and he was alive. Draco quieted down and pinned Snape with an eager gaze. "What happened? Tell me! I didn't know anything was planned."

Snape sat back down, motioning Draco to another chair. Draco hadn't noticed Potter yet, so perhaps this was a good time to tell the story, before the questions piled up too high. This tale would go in the history books for sure. "That's because nothing was. You do know that Harry Potter was innocent?"

Draco sniffed. "Not all that surprised, really. Bloody Gryffindors."

Snape commiserated with this statement, but continued. "They'd had him out, and he was at the Weasleys for recuperation. From what little I'd heard, he was totally gone, wouldn't talk, didn't recognize anyone, nothing."

Draco grimaced. "I didn't like him at all, but that's harsh for anyone."

Snape nodded. "Yes. Well, Voldemort heard, and decided that it was a good time to kill him off, and any miscellaneous people around him. So, about thirty of us apparated to the Weasley's, broke the wards and stormed in. To make a long story short, they were all helpless, and suddenly Potter looks up, totally sane, and joins the Dark Lord." Draco's eyes widened, but he didn't interrupt. Snape chuckled. "The look on Black's face. Well, it wasn't funny at the time. Potter just asks

the Dark Lord if he can kill a couple of them, and avada kevadra's Lupin."

This time there was an interruption. "Harry Potter killed Lupin?" Draco looked shocked.

Snape nodded. "It certainly made it real. I was counting my last minutes. Potter certainly had every reason to think I was a spy, and delivering me would have earned him some favor. Anyway, Voldemort starts to taunt Albus, uses crucio on him, and it doesn't work. Don't ask me why. Potter's standing right behind the great git and suddenly just about explodes with power." The potions master chuckled again, tension bleeding off of him by the moment. "He yells 'Sucker' and blows up the bloody dark lord."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. Then he grabs Nott's arm and somehow links into the spell that Voldemort set up to take us with him when he died. He spoke to me for just a second, called me professor..." Snape sounded incredulous. "... and he did something to the spell. Saved you and me, I guess."

Draco looked stunned. "More than that. Most of the younger followers, they're still alive. Knocked for a loop, but still breathing. I checked. They still have the mark though. I wonder why mine's gone?"

Snape shook his head, wondering once again just where Potter had gotten the power to do all this. "Mine's gone as well. I think that he knew I was a spy, and just removed the mark instead of blocking the curse. Don't ask me how."

Draco frowned. "That doesn't make sense, though, he wouldn't have any reason to think that I was a spy. When he knew me last, I was..." Draco's voice faded at the look on Snape's face. It became obvious to the younger man that Snape had had something to do with the matter of the missing mark. "Thank you." Snape nodded. Nothing more would ever be said on the matter. Blatantly changing the subject, Draco asked. "So, what happened then."

A voice from the couch mumbled. "Then I try to apparate and land in a rose bush. Typical." Draco jumped about a foot, and came down standing with his wand out, pointing at the figure on the couch. "Going to curse me, Malfoy?" Harry Potter slowly sat up and rubbed his head.

Draco sputtered for a minute. "Potter? Here?" He turned towards his mentor. "What the...?"

Snape ignored the younger man and moved towards the couch. "Do you need anything, Potter?"

Green eyes met black. His voice was cold. "You're being awfully nice to me, Snape. Why?" Gone was the rather innocent, trusting Potter of old. This one would be hard to fool, and cautious with his trust, as well he should be.

"I owe you a life debt." Snape's simple and honest answer seemed to startle Harry, who blinked in surprise. "And not you're father's either. That spell would have killed me easily. I imagine that you had to put considerable power behind stopping it, as close as I was to the source."

Harry blinked again. "Erm."

Draco chose this moment to shut his hanging jaw, compose himself and move forward. "I owe you a life debt as well. You have my gratitude, Potter." Draco might not have liked Potter as a schoolboy, but things had changed since then. He was alive when Potter had had no real reason to keep him that way.

Harry looked downright shocked at this statement from his childhood enemy, but managed to collect himself very quickly. "Umm. Right. You're welcome. Glad to hear you're on the light side." He glanced at Snape and continued. "I could really use a pain potion and your strongest energy potion."

Snape nodded and moved towards the adjoining potions lab. Draco sat down again and stared at Harry for a long moment. Finally, he

broke the rather uncomfortable silence. "So, why'd you do it, Potter? Surely you don't feel you owe the wizarding world anything?"

Harry's eyes went deadly cold. "I don't happen to think that. However, I've always known that I was going to have to deal with Voldemort. I have to admit that this wasn't exactly what I was expecting when I thought of this before..." Harry's jaw tensed for a long moment. "...Azkaban, but it worked."

Snape returned with the potions, handing them to Harry, who sniffed the liquids carefully and drank with a grimace. "Well, I don't suppose your old friends will be welcoming you back with open arms anymore, not after you killed the werewolf."

Harry's eyes widened over the lip of the last vial. "Lupin. Bloody... I forgot." With that cryptic statement, he rose and staggered for the door. Snape looked on in shock. The high-powered energy potion that he'd given Potter should have made it almost impossible to stagger. Potter should have been bouncing off walls. The drain on Potter's energy reserves must have been absolutely massive for the potion to have so little effect. Then, realizing where Potter must be heading, he made eye contact with Draco and both of them hurried to follow. They were both honor bound to see that Potter didn't get killed, at least not tonight.

Bloody Gryffindors, indeed.

COMING SOON: Harry intimidates the entire Great Hall, and says a few words, managing to confuse the Order even more.

OK, well, thanks once again to every one that has reviewed! I imagine it's going to hit 100 on this chapter. You cannot imagine how happy that makes me. Oh, and trust me, the story isn't over now that Voldemort is dead, we still have a LOT of issues to work through, hence the title Redemption. I think that the title applies in a lot of different ways. So, if you could be so kind, leave a review and tell me what you think, and I'll get the next chapter up in a couple of days. – krtshadow

## CHAPTER 6

### Theories

The Great Hall was full of people, ranging from aurors busily questioning the witnesses to the night's events, teachers desperate for news, and miscellaneous ministry officials getting everyone's way, to Madam Pomfrey, who was tending to the minor wounds sustained by the original attack on the Burrow. Sirius Black and the Weasley family were gathered in a corner around a cot and the covered corpse of Remus Lupin. Dumbledore was doing his best to keep the ministry away from the grieving friends and orchestrate the gathering all at the same time. All this conspired together to make for an echoing babble that filled the hall with noise.

This noise stopped instantly the moment the doors swung open to reveal Harry Potter. Every eye in the building, with the exception of Sirius, immediately locked on to the figure in the doorway. No one even moved as the cold green eyes scanned the gathering. Eyes lighting on the group in the corner, he strode into the room. Unnoticed by the assembly was the entrance of two dark cloaked men who entered right behind him. All eyes stayed glued on the rather menacing figure of the Boy Who Lived as he walked down the hall towards those that he had one time considered family.

No one really knew what to do. One rather young auror managed to raise a wand in the approaching wizard's direction, but Harry merely glared in the direction of the wand and the young man decided that perhaps he'd better just hide behind a couple of his fellows. This was the man who'd just single-handedly taken out You Know Who. Not to mention all of his death eaters. Without a wand. Yes, he'd just move to the back of the room now.

Harry stopped before the cot. The Weasleys, unsure of what was going on, had reluctantly parted for him, and were currently shooting a combination of glares and mystified looks his way. Sirius finally looked up and met eyes with his godson. He started to his feet, and the hall braced for an explosion. The question on everyone's mind was simple. Who would kill who? Dumbledore, halfway across the room, for once seemed to be in the wrong place at the right time, and

he hurried towards the corner, perhaps hoping to stop the seemingly inevitable conflict.

It didn't happen. Sirius merely looked at Harry and mouthed, "Why?" Harry's face never wavered. Sirius tried again. "Why Remus, Harry? Why not me? I deserved it, he didn't do anything." Sirius' voice was shaking and he looked haggard, but the expression on his face said that he really wanted to know the answer to his questions.

Harry's voice was hard. "No, he didn't. None of you did." There was no doubt in any of the listener's minds that Harry was speaking of the fact that they, through their own indifference and fear, had condemned him to Azkaban.

Sirius slumped, unable to find words to refute that, and unwilling to attack his godson. He watched, heartbroken, as Harry moved to the bedside and pulled the sheet back from Lupin's face. He could only muster a plea. "Don't hurt him anymore."

Harry raised a sardonic eyebrow. "I never did."

Sirius sputtered in anger as the assembled Weasleys muttered in dissent. Dumbledore, just now reaching the group, blinked with surprise. Suddenly, a light flared in his eyes and the twinkle, gone for so long, returned along with a look of questioning surprise. Harry glanced down at Remus' pale, cold face and grabbed up the wand that lay beside him. This was the last straw for Sirius. He lunged forward, frantic to defend the body of his friend from further harm, only to find himself held back by the headmaster, who was watching the proceedings with growing wonder.

Harry waved Remus' wand over the body and muttered quietly. "Illusionus Dissolvo. Envenerate." Jaws dropped, and Dumbledore looked triumphant.

Remus' eyes opened slowly and he blinked up at Harry in surprise. "W-what...?"

Harry smiled coldly and handed him his wand. "Ask one of them, I'm leaving now." And he turned in a swirl of robes and walked away. As



he passed Dumbledore, he said under his breath. "You know it is not the words."

Limply holding his wand, Remus looked at Sirius, who was standing next to him, jaw still hanging open and tears still visible on his face. He then looked at the Weasley family, who had turned as one to watch the figure of Harry Potter exit the Great Hall. Lastly, he turned to Dumbledore and was surprised to see a smile stretching the entire width of his aged face. Then, sitting up, he carefully enunciated the following request. "What... is... going... ON?!?" As if to accentuate the question, the door slammed shut behind Harry Potter and pandemonium erupted.

Sirius threw his arms around his friend. "MOONY!" It was only Remus' enhanced strength that kept him from being crushed.

Hermione turned to Dumbledore and queried eagerly. "What just happened? Did he just do what I think he did? How is it possible to reverse Avada Kevadra?" Arthur tried his best to field similar questions from his family. Madam Pomfrey shakily checked Remus' pulse and vitals. The stunned werewolf never took his eyes off of the headmaster's face, obviously still needing an explanation of the night's events. The last thing that he remembered was looking on in horror as Harry joined the dark lord. Now he woke up in the Great Hall, Harry had just left the room, without being pursued, and Remus was now officially confused. The other occupants of the hall resumed their gossip, voices raised to allow themselves to be heard. In short, it was bedlam.

Finally, Dumbledore raised his hand and the noise quieted down. Glancing at the surrounding officials and aurors, he raised an eyebrow at those standing in shock around Remus' bed. "Why don't we adjourn this meeting to my office, as we have quite a lot to discuss."

Remus got to his feet, shrugging off Sirius' attempts to help him. "I'm fine, Padfoot, I'm all right, really! It feels like I just got hit with stupidity."

Dumbledore smiled, his familiar delight at knowing more than everyone else clearly evident in his eyes. "I have reason to believe

that that is all that you were hit by." Ignoring the gasps of astonishment, he led the way to the gargoyle and murmured the password. "Toffee Eclairs." Ushering the group into the room, he waved his wand and summoned chairs for the group, which consisted of Arthur, Molly, Bill, Charlie, Fred, George, Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Remus and Sirius. Percy, although he had joined his family in the Great Hall, had chosen to remain behind with his ministry coworkers, and Bill and Fred's respective wives had been chosen to help spread the news to the other Light side resistance groups.

Dumbledore sank into the chair behind his desk and eyed the gathering. "Well, this certainly has been an interesting evening. Remus, I am sure that you will want to hear the whole story at some later time, but in the interest of time conservation, I shall only give you the brief version. Harry is not dark, what you saw earlier appears to have been an act, as was Harry's insanity. Why he played that part, we will have to find out from him. However, Harry has managed to vanquish the Dark Lord and all of his death eaters, although we are still unsure as to the status of those not present at the Weasleys."

Footsteps echoed in the corridor outside the office. Everyone looked up and watched as Draco Malfoy entered the room. "I believe that I can help you with that. There is a rather large group of death eaters at the Goyle Estate, as there was a meeting in progress. Most of the younger death eaters were still alive when I left, but they seemed to be under the influence of a powerful stunning spell. I notified a couple of aurors so they'll be picked up."

Dumbledore nodded. "Thank you, Draco, please join us. I assume Severus has filled you in?" At Draco's nod of assent, Dumbledore continued. "After this stunning display of power, Harry disappeared. We do not know where he went." Draco resisted the urge to smirk. He loved being privy to information no one else had. Unaware that someone present had more information, Dumbledore continued with his explanation. "We brought your body back here, for it certainly looked like you were dead, Remus. Harry entered the room very suddenly and lifted a very complex illusion off of you, and then followed it with an envenerate curse, which is what made me think that you had only been stupified rather than killed as we had first believed."

Ron sat forward in his chair. "But HOW? We all saw Harry use the killing curse on Remus. Why didn't it kill him?"

Dumbledore smiled. "As Harry left, he told me that it was not the words. I believe he was referring to the fact that one of the fundamental rules of magic is that it is not the actual words of a curse that direct the magic, but the intent." At the groups questioning look, he continued. "This is not well known, but the only reason words are used is to facilitate the feeling of intent that is necessary to force the magic to behave in the proper manner. If this was not true, all spells would have to be in one language, and this is not the case. So, technically, words are not necessary for magic, but the fact that it is much easier to use words had made the point nearly mute. Another example is accidental magic, which needs no words, because in those instances the intent is enough. Harry must have said the words of the killing curse while squelching the murderous intent behind those words. It's theoretically possible, I am just not sure if that has ever been done before. He also must have wandlessly sent a series of spells at Remus." Dumbledore began to tick them off on his fingers. "Let's see, a color curse for the flash of light, an illusion to make it look as if you had stopped breathing, and stupify to restrain you from moving. Also, some type of blocking spell on the wand itself, because Voldemort was unable to use it after Harry had been in possession of it. Although, if he was using wordless magic, it is possible that he tampered with it the instant he touched it. Amazing." He glanced at Sirius. "His power is amazing."

A puzzled expression crossed the headmaster's face. "However, although it takes does take great power to be able to do what he did tonight, that is not what puzzles me. Even if he had always had the raw power to do this, there is absolutely no way that you can just know or inherit the ability to block the words of a spell or conjure wandless, wordless magic. I'm not even talking what he did against the Dark Lord. He shouldn't have even been able to fake Remus' death." The headmaster's voice trailed off.

Remus, although stunned by what they had just been told, managed to piece together a question. "What exactly do you mean?"

"I mean, there is no way that he learned that in Azkaban, and there is no way that he could pull off even one spell of what he did tonight without years of practice and training. I really don't understand that at all."

Draco interrupted the growing silence with a mocking drawl. "Honestly, do you idiots really think that Azkaban could have held the man you saw tonight?" Rolling his eyes at the stunned looks around him, he continued. "He wasn't there. Or if he was, he certainly wasn't spending his time being tortured by dementors and going insane. Bloody obvious, if you ask me." He quite ignored the fact that no one had.

With that, the room erupted into confused questions that no one could answer and the meeting lasted far into the night, leaving everybody but one feeling very annoyed.

Draco just thought the entire situation was bloody hilarious.

COMING SOON: Harry goes home, and in the meantime, discovers an information source that might prove invaluable.

Well, another chapter done. The focus of this story is now on finding out exactly how Harry was able to do what he did, and on his relationships with his former friends and how they will react to the now totally sane and angry Harry. Not to mention, how Harry will react to them. I do have quite a story line plotted out, so this story should last at least another 15 chapters or so. Unfortunately, college starts for me next week and once that happens, I won't be able to devote quite as much time to writing. So, that will just mean that I won't be putting out 3-4 chapters a week like I have been. I'll still try to do one a week though, since I really hate it if a story that I like doesn't get updated for 2 months or something. Next chapter up in a couple of days... hopefully, anyway.

-krtshadow

## CHAPTER 7

### Recruitment

Harry Potter strode out the Great Hall, managing to look both powerful and menacing. That is, until the doors slammed shut behind him. The second that no one was watching, he staggered over to the staircase in the entryway and literally fell on the bottom step. He knew that he had very little time before he passed out entirely, and he wasn't exactly sure what to do. If he could only make it past the apparation wards...

The sound of approaching footsteps caused him to snap his head up. He relaxed only slightly at the sight of Snape. He watched the older man approach with guarded eyes, aware of the fact that he had very little energy left to defend himself against an attack if one was launched. Luckily for him, attack did not seem to be on the potions master's mind. Snape sneered sardonically at the recumbent wizard on the steps. "Well, Potter, you certainly do know how to make things exciting." The sarcasm was literally dripping off of his words.

Far from being offended, Harry was just relieved to be talking to someone that he was pretty sure wasn't going to start either worshipping him or apologizing endlessly. He really didn't have the patience to deal with or accept either. After six years in Azkaban, Harry could relate to the fact that sarcasm could be used as a shield to hide behind. So he replied without malice. "Yes, I've always been talented in that regard." Gritting his teeth, he pushed himself to his feet. He really needed to get out of here.

Snape eyed the wavering figure in front of him, concerned in spite of himself. "Potter, do you have somewhere to go? Somewhere where no one will find you for a day or two? I'm no mediwizard, but you are about to collapse."

"Yes, I know and yes, I do have a place to go, but I need to get outside the wards." Harry looked at the door leading to the grounds and the ten minute walk to the edge of the wards. At the rate he would be moving at, it would probably take him closer to thirty

minutes. Harry was reasonably sure that he would not be conscious in thirty minutes.

Snape bit back his question about where Harry could possibly have to go to after being imprisoned in Azkaban and commented quietly. "Dumbledore made a hole in the wards at a secret location, on the off chance that Voldemort lays... err... laid siege to the castle. If you stand in one spot, you can apparate out. It's just around the corner, follow me."

Harry looked up in relief. "Thank you, Professor."

Snape led the way up a corridor and down a set of stairs. Finally he stopped before a closed door. "Justice to Voldemort." The door opened silently and Snape waved Harry forward. The younger man raised an eyebrow and copied the gesture. Snape smirked and entered first, followed closely by Harry, who scanned the room carefully before turning his attention back to the potions master.

"Just stand on the square floor stone over there and you can apparate out anytime. It only works for going out, so don't try to come back in, Potter."

Harry nodded and then sent a searching gaze the professor's way. "I have a proposition for you, Snape. I will be needing information regarding the state of the wizarding world. Due to my notoriety, it is inconvenient for me to gather it. You are perfectly placed to fill me in on the news. You can use your discretion regarding the trust you have with Dumbledore. It will be worth your while. Take it or leave it."

Snape looked at the man before him. His respect for the wizard that had killed Voldemort continued to grow. He had hated his father, but the fact that they were different was becoming more and more obvious all of the time. James Potter would have never lowered himself to ask for help from a Slytherin, regardless of the usefulness of such help. Snape did not bother underestimating himself. He was very good at spying, or in this case, information gathering. Potter was recruiting the best, and not wasting any time in doing so. He took a second to decide if gathering information for Potter was something

that he was interested in. He had no doubt that Potter was telling the truth when said that it would be worth his while.

Once again, he remembered his earlier deduction that Harry Potter would be the next Dumbledore, taking his place as the greatest wizard alive. Logic stated that getting on his side was a good thing. He glanced over at the patiently waiting wizard and answered. "What's in it for me?" Potter could claim his life debt here, and then he would have no choice, but Snape doubted it. The old Potter would have never claimed it, considering it his duty not to be rewarded for his good deeds. This Potter would probably just save it for a more serious situation. It might never be needed, but Potter would not hesitate to claim it if it so suited him. Azkaban seemed to have changed him into a Slytherin. Or at least some type of crossbreed. The morals of a Gryffindor combined with the cunning of a Slytherin. Snape rather liked the change. It made dealing with him so much more interesting. Like playing chess with a master.

Harry's left eyebrow raised slightly. "I know where Voldemort's private potion supply room is." Snape's eyes widened despite his efforts to keep his countenance calm. This was like mentioning a treasure ship to a pirate. Voldemort had been rumored to have every potion ingredient in the world, including rare, illegal, and impossible to find items like powdered basilisk eyes and sphinx teeth. Although Snape had made most of the potions for the dark lord, the ingredients had always been doled out to the exact ounce. Harry stifled a grin at the look of anticipation in Snape's eyes. "He had two, actually. I'll tell you both locations in exchange for information and potions or potions ingredients when I need them. One location now, and one later."

Snape didn't waste time. "Done. As long as you serve light." Harry nodded. Snape was inwardly relieved. The potion ingredients were valuable, but he refused to serve another dark lord, no matter what the incentive. Harry's immediate agreement made it unlikely that it was in his plans, but Snape would continue to judge that for himself. Snape did have a question, though. "How do you know where they are, Potter? You've been in prison, for Merlin's sake."

Harry looked at Snape coldly, and for a second, the professor thought that he wouldn't answer the question. Finally, he replied in a tone that

did not invite any further questions. "My connection to him grew." The word 'him' was spat like a foul taste accompanied the thought. There was no question that Harry meant Voldemort. Snape suppressed a shiver at the idea. Azkaban would be bad enough, but to be in Azkaban with a tendency to get visions of Voldemort? Truly, that was hell. Snape wondered for the first of many times just how Potter had retained his sanity through out his time in the dementor infested prison.

Shrugging off the topic of Voldemort, Harry stepped onto the irregularly shaped stone and faced Snape one last time. "One of the store rooms is located in the old Grennady House. Third floor, big picture of a nundu, password is 'lord of all'."

Snape sneered. "Humble, wasn't he?" It felt very good to be able to sneer at Voldemort and know that he was dead and that he couldn't find out.

Potter didn't comment on Voldemort's humility. "Owl me." It was a command, and Snape found himself nodding agreement before he even had a chance to think. Then, with a pop, Harry Potter disappeared. Snape, still thinking about the multitude of events that had occurred in the last few hours, followed Potter's example, heading to the Grennady house to retrieve his potions ingredients before some curious Auror decided to search this one of many of Voldemort's hideouts.

Little did he know that he would be the last human to see the Boy Who Lived for over three weeks.

A little over two hundred miles away, a man appeared out of nowhere in the middle of a heavily wooded area. If anyone had been watching, they would have seen the man stagger forward and suddenly disappear as if running into some kind of shield that blocked an area from view. However, no one was within a mile of this place, and no one had been for centuries, so no one witnessed this strange occurrence.

Harry walked though the invisibility spell, just grateful that the castle was where he'd been told it would be. There was no way that he



could have even worked up the energy for one more apparation spell. He was done, there was no more magical reserve that he could tap, and his physical strength was waning fast. He looked up at the towering castle in front of him. He could tell from the outside alone that it was near ruin with age. It was quite obvious that no one had been inside for hundreds of years. Good.

The huge wooden door was stuck in an open position, and Harry stumbled through and started walking in a random direction. Luckily, he found a bedroom and, ignoring the dust that covered the sturdy but old furniture, fell onto the bed with a sigh. After Azkaban, a little dirt in the room meant nothing. Exhaustion overtook him like a wave on the shore and he was helpless against the encroaching flow.

Even if he'd known that someone had followed him, there would have been nothing he could have done about it.

COMING SOON: Sirius and Remus have a late night conversation about James, guilt, dementors, and what to do about Harry.

Ah, another chapter down. Kinda short, I know, but I'll try to get the next one up by this weekend and it's longer. Please review and let me know what you think of the story.

## CHAPTER 8

### Interlude

The wizarding world woke the next morning to find that Voldemort was gone. The party atmosphere of nineteen years previous returned twofold and the ministry's Magical Secrecy and Anti Discovery (MSAD) agents were busy for days afterwards, wiping memories, confiscating magical articles from muggles and cleaning up the aftereffects of celebration spells. There were parties in the streets of nearly every wizarding town, commemorative newspapers, plaques and bracelets were made, and the magical community as a whole heaved a huge sigh of relief. They had survived yet again, due to the heroic actions of Harry Potter. The story of the night that You Know Who died was retold over and over, with no version quite the same.

Harry Potter was a hero and the people loved him. The hatred that had been rampant after Harry's incarceration seemed to be totally forgotten. The Order of Merlin was scheduled to be awarded him as soon as he showed himself to the world that so desperately wanted to honor him. Statues were made and placed in several different locations, including Diagon Alley and in the Hall of Honor at the Ministry Building in London. May 17th, the day that Voldemort's reign of terror ended, was renamed Harry Potter Day.

However, as the days moved into weeks, the furor died down and the newspapers began to speculate that Harry had left the wizarding world for good. Rumors ran wild, one day he was dead, tragically dying mere moments after leaving Hogwarts, the next, he had moved to an island somewhere and chosen to live as a hermit. Hundreds of supposed sightings were reported daily, and the ministry finally had to announce that they would not be following up on these sightings due to the fact that they assigned just one ministry employee to each case, they'd have to hire over a thousand new workers. Only one thing seemed to be certain, and that was that Harry Potter was not making himself known or trying to lay claim to any of the things that his heroic act had entitled him to. Where he was, no one knew.

His friends and family, namely, the Weasleys, Hermione, Sirius, Remus, and Dumbledore, stayed out of the limelight and had their

own theories as to the whereabouts of the young man that had turned their world upside down. After careful discussion, Dumbledore decided that the Order was not going to try to hunt Harry down. Certain that he was alive, but in hiding somewhere, even Sirius, although desperate for forgiveness from his godson, had to admit that it was unlikely that Harry wanted to see them. If Harry did want to reconcile with his former friends, he would have plenty of opportunity to do so. However, if he didn't want to see them ever again, he had earned his privacy.

This at least was the opinion of most of the members. Both Sirius and Remus hated the thought of doing nothing, and, as the time since Harry's disappearance neared the three week mark, were at Hogwarts, where they had lived for most of the war years, discussing the issue of their best friend's son. The students were gone for the summer, and the school was nearly deserted. The two old friends found themselves at the top of the astronomy tower, staring at the stars in quiet companionship. Remus, fresh from the trials of the full moon, looked haggard, but healthy, and for once Sirius was the one who looked thin and pale. The ex-convict hadn't been eating very well, and Remus was trying to figure out how to approach the topic without tempting the rather touchy man to throw him off of the parapet. Sirius was taking the disappearance of his godson very hard, and the last thing that Remus wanted to do was push his friend into greater depression.

Before Remus could frame the words, however, Sirius spoke up. "Moony, do you think he'll come back?"

Remus gazed up at the star-studded sky and sighed. "I really don't know, Padfoot. I just don't know how to predict what he'd do. I probably wouldn't come back, but who knows what Harry will do? My instinct says that he will, though. I think that James would have."

Sirius nodded. "I wish I was as confident as you seem to be. But, I just... I just don't know. Prongs probably would have come back, broke my nose and both my arms, and then got over it, but Harry isn't James." His voice trailed off, leaving silence in its wake.

Remus glanced over at the shadowed face of his friend. "Sirius, you can't let it get you down. I... I'm worried about you. I get the feeling that you're going to do something rash."

Sirius snorted. "Worried I'll take a leap off a cliff, Moony?"

Remus didn't find the idea as funny as Sirius obviously did. "Would you?"

Sirius turned his face toward Remus in surprise. "You really are worried about me, aren't you? If it makes you feel better, I swear that I will not and have not considered suicide. Well, not since Azkaban. I just feel kind of useless right now, like I should be doing something and yet, there's nothing to do."

Remus was relieved to find that he had been overreacting regarding the state of Sirius' mind. "Yeah, I know what you mean." Sirius rested his head on his knees and mumbled something. Remus, unsure if he was supposed to have heard that or not, queried. "What was that?"

Sirius raised his head and spoke, anger touching the edge of his voice. "I said, no you don't know what I mean. Prongs trusted me to take care of Harry, and I can't even manage to keep him out of Azkaban, much less give him the home that he deserved. Deserves."

Remus felt a stirring of anger himself. Although he tried to restrain it, his voice came out with a tinge of a growl in it. "Don't you tell me that I don't understand, Sirius Black. Don't you dare think that I can't feel as guilty as you do. I watched it happen a second time, Sirius, and I did nothing. I knew Harry better than most, I taught him for a year, gave him private lessons and everything, and I was still stupid enough to believe Voldemort's lies like everyone else. I should have done something."

Sirius looked back out at the stars. Finally, he spoke. "Sorry, Moony, I didn't mean to imply anything. I know you care for him, too."

Remus was still moping. "Well, I didn't show it very well, did I?" Self-loathing was evident in his tone.

"No, but neither did I. Do I need to talk you out of jumping off of something tall now?" Remus punched him lightly in the arm, but didn't respond. Sirius sat silent for a long moment, working up his courage to ask something that he both did and didn't want to know. "You taught him Expecto Patronum, didn't you?"

Remus was unsure as to where this particular question was leading, but answered. "Yes. Best bloody patronus, I ever saw, too, once he got it working. It was Prongs, before Harry even knew James had been an animagus."

Sirius stated his question bluntly. "Do you know what he sees when he feels dementors?"

Remus winced. "Are you sure you want to know?" It was something that had been giving Remus nightmares ever since discovering Harry's innocence.

"No, but tell me anyway."

"If you're sure." Sirius nodded and Remus continued, rushing the words together in an effort to get them out as fast as possible. "He told me once that he would hear James telling Lily to run, that he'd hold Voldemort off, and that he heard Lily begging for Harry's life, and then..." Remus' voice broke slightly, but he continued. "...Lily screaming and a flash of green light..." He couldn't say anymore for fear his voice wouldn't work at all.

"Oh, sweet Merlin. Six years." Sirius' voice was husky and guilt ridden as he thought of what those memories, constantly repeated, would do to the psyche of a fifteen-year-old. It was no wonder that Harry hadn't come back. They'd sentenced him not only to Azkaban, but to hear the death of his parents, his worst nightmare, replayed over and over again. Harry had seen other horrors as well, and every moment of pain in his short life would have been replayed. Sirius couldn't blame Harry if he never wanted anything to do with any of them ever again. Silence reigned over the tower as both men remained lost in their thoughts. Finally, Sirius spoke again. "Know why I hadn't thought of killing myself over all this? Because I know that I don't have that right anymore. I've screwed things up with Harry so bad that they'll

probably never be fixed, but I don't have the right to decide that. If Harry should decide that he needs me, then I have to be alive and waiting. He deserves that much courtesy, whether he uses it or not."

Remus looked over in shock. "Why, Padfoot, that was downright profound. I didn't know you had it in you."

Sirius chuckled, a little life returning to his voice. "Mr. Padfoot respectfully requests that Mr. Moony keep his estimable, yet sarcastic, remarks in that rather empty space called his brain."

Remus smiled at this revival of the traditional Marauders debating tactic. "Mr. Moony, although surprised that Mr. Padfoot actually knows the meaning of the word estimable, doubts that he could spell it, seeing as Mr. Padfoot's age has now overtaken his IQ."

This actually managed to get a laugh from Sirius. "Ouch. You always were the best at that."

Remus bowed his head mockingly, glad to see his friend smiling again. "Thank you, thank you."

Sirius was quiet for so long that Remus thought he might have dozed off. Eventually, he spoke again, causing the werewolf to start in surprise. "I just think that there has to be something, some way that I can prove to Harry that I'm sorry, that he can trust me this time, something I could do, anything! But I don't think that he'll even let me talk to him. I apologized to him at the Weasleys when I thought that his mind was gone, and he never even looked at me."

Remus nodded agreement. "Somehow, I don't think that sorry is going to get us anywhere, Padfoot. I'm not sure that if I was in his shoes and someone just said that they were sorry, I wouldn't just punch him a good one." Remus would never know how close Harry had come to doing exactly that.

"But, Remus, there has to be something!" Sirius sounded desperate. Suddenly the werewolf sat straight up and stared unblinkingly into space for a long moment. Sirius watched in surprise as he then leapt to his feet and started striding towards the door. Sirius got to his feet

to follow, wondering what was going on. "Umm, Moony, what's going on? Where are you going?"

Remus turned around, grabbed Sirius' sleeve and headed for the door once again, dragging the confused ex-convict along behind. "I just got an idea. We're going to the library."

Sirius moaned in mock terror. "Not again, Moony, you know I swore at graduation never to set foot in the library again. It was a public oath, I cannot go back on my word, you know. My honor would be forever besmirched." He started dragging his heels, totally ignoring the fact that the werewolf's superior strength made doing so absolutely useless.

"It's for Harry."

"Why are you walking so slow, Moony?"

COMING SOON: Harry discovers who followed him, and explores his new home.

OK, so no Harry in this one, but let me know if I did all right on the interaction between Padfoot and Moony. It wasn't as easy to do as I thought it would be! =) Reviews are appreciated. –krtshadow

OK, OK, we're back to Harry now! Sorry about this chapter. I tried to make it better, but it's mostly just set up stuff and although it has to be in there, it isn't all that exciting. Don't worry, things will get interesting soon enough! To make up for it, I'll try to get another chapter up by Friday or Saturday.

Umm, one note on the previous chapter. On Padfoot and Moony acting a little young, well, maybe. But, I tend to relate the banter style of conversation with them, and I know plenty of people around that age that have light conversation like that with very close friends. Cough, my father and his brothers, cough! So, that's just my interpretation of their friendship, that it is very serious no pun intended and that they are best friends, but that they tend to fall back on their Hogwarts ways, both because of the happy memories that they shared during that time, and just their respective personalities. They can have a very serious conversation, and end it by laughing at something, or more likely, each other. Anyway, enough explanation. Moving on now...

Thanks for the reviews! I hit 200!! Yay!!

## DISCLAIMER IN CHAPTER 1

## CHAPTER 9

### Awake

...Harry was floating, gliding in the air, chasing after the snitch, diving... and the cell was barren, screams still evident in the motionless air... Voldemort laughed cruelly and yet another helpless muggle died for nothing... Voldemort, free, bright light, his magic?...

No, that was the light from the window, shining right in his eyes. Harry woke slowly, consciousness returning at the speed of a glacier. Voldemort was dead, and the dreams he'd had were just that, dreams. They had lost the vivid detail and eerie feeling that had accompanied the numerous visions. They were only nightmares, and Harry was relieved to find that, far from sticking in his mind constantly like the visions had, these faded as he became more fully awake. Harry



pushed himself up to a sitting position, reaching up to straighten his glasses, which had somehow managed to stay on his face.

It was at this moment that a faint pop announced the arrival of someone else in the bedchamber. Harry, who had had every reason to believe that he was totally alone, reacted rather spectacularly to the surprise. Throwing himself off of the bed, he hit the ground rolling, coming up by the window with a glowing shield fully erect around his body and a curse at the ready. Venom filled his voice as he said coldly. "Step out, right now, or face the consequences."

For a long moment it looked like the consequences were going to be unleashed. Then, timidly, a small, rather knobby head poked out from behind a chair and a faintly familiar voice shakily stated. "Mr. Harry Potter sir, Dobby not mean to startle Mr. Harry Potter sir."

Harry relaxed, dropped his shield, and almost fell into a nearby chair. "Merlin. Hello, Dobby."

The small house elf looked ecstatic to be called by name. "Dobby is very glad that Mr. Harry Potter sir is free. Is wonderful! And big castle to clean! Mr. Harry Potter sir want to hire Dobby?" The elf looked hopefully up at Harry, who was just noticing that the room seemed much cleaner than he remembered from the few seconds of attention he'd given it the night before.

Or was it the night before? Harry glanced back at the anxiously waiting house elf. "Dobby, I'd be honored to hire you. I could really use the help. In fact, if you know of any other elves that need a job, I'll either hire them or provide them a place to live, whichever they prefer."

Dobby nodded eagerly. "Winky come with Dobby. Winky and Dobby work while Mr. Harry Potter sir was sleepy. Dobby find more help for Mr. Harry Potter sir. Mr. Harry Potter sir is hero!" With this exclamation, the now rather embarrassed wizard found himself being hugged around the legs by an extremely exuberant Dobby. "Dobby knew Mr. Harry Potter sir was good wizard!"

"Thank you, Dobby." Harry gently disentangled himself. "I'm glad you thought so. So, how did you find me?"

Dobby looked unquestionably smug. "Follow Professor Snape and Mr. Harry Potter sir. Know Mr. Harry Potter sir leave Hogwarts and..."

Harry interrupted in the interests of saving both time and his sanity. "Please, Dobby, just call me Harry."

Dobby looked horrified at this, but seemed to be able to reach a compromise with himself. "Harry sir, Dobby use house elf magic, find Harry sir's castle. Very dirty castle. Dobby and Winky been cleaning all the time."

Harry frowned as an earlier thought returned to him. "Dobby, how long was I asleep?"

Dobby thought for a moment, counting on his long fingers. "Twenty four days Harry sir was sleepy. Castle still dirty." Dobby looked slightly embarrassed by this admission.

Harry was shocked by the news that his supposed one night rest had really lasted over three weeks, but he managed to reassure Dobby. "Don't worry about it, Dobby. I appreciate the work both you and Winky have done." Now that he was noticing, he was very hungry and rather stiff as well. Which was no wonder, if he'd been asleep that long. Even magical beings couldn't survive without food. They lasted longer, to be sure, but not forever. "If I could get something to eat, that would be..." He didn't even get a chance to finish his sentence. Dobby snapped his fingers and a table laden with a huge breakfast landed with a slight thump right in front of Harry. "... oh, thanks."

"Does Harry sir need anything else?" As Harry shook his head, Dobby disappeared with another faint pop, but not before waving his hand and straightening both the bed and Harry's clothes.

"Well, that was interesting." Harry announced to the room at large. Sitting down, he devoured nearly half of the food, which was a far cry from the rather dull fare of Azkaban. Grabbing a muffin to munch on

while he walked, he wandered out the door and into the rest of his new home.

The castle was nameless, or at least Harry didn't know what it had once been called. Deserted for nearly 900 years, it was still structurally sound, but much of the furniture and décor would need to be totally replaced. From what Harry had been told, the family that had built it had been rather solitary, and when the last heir had died, he had taken the location of the castle with it. Since it was warded in a similar, although far less complex, manner as Hogwarts, it was impossible to find unless one knew where to look.

Harry was now the only human with that information. He pondered the question of whether or not he was stealing by living in a castle that he didn't own, but finally decided that 900 years was probably long enough to call the place abandoned. It was perfect for him. No one knew where he was and he liked it that way. Dumbledore himself couldn't scry Harry's location.

Harry glanced up, realizing that he was back at the front door. It had been repaired, and looked as intimidating as a fifteen foot door can. The entrance hall was wide and barren, and it was obvious that the house elves had cleaned the place from top to bottom. Further on was a large room that looked like at one time had served the same function as the Great Hall at Hogwarts. Harry walked the length, pondering whether or not it would be possible to enchant the ceiling to do something interesting. Leaving that decision for another day, he opened a door and found the kitchens. Not wanting to disturb Dobby and Winky again, he shut the door again and headed to the stairway.

His quick tour of the castle found two empty towers, a lot of empty rooms that he did not enter, two stairways that seemingly led to nothing at all, three dungeons complete with torture implements, a dusty library with empty shelves and unopened boxes stacked to the ceiling, and a weapons room. This last caught Harry's attention and he entered. He was examining a rack of weapons that sat against a wall when he noticed that there was another occupant of the room. A silvery, opaque ghost sat sleeping near a rusty suit of armor. He was dressed in what appeared to be medieval wizards garb, and appeared to be middle aged. Harry was unsure on how to go about

waking a sleeping ghost, but thought that it would be polite to introduce himself. "Ahem. Hello?" The ghost shot straight up in the air and came down with a ghostly sword clenched in his fist and with a swift movement had it pointed at Harry's chest. "AHHH!" Surprised, Harry leapt back, erecting a shield for the second time this morning.

"Merciful heavens!" The ghost looked at Harry with wide eyes, lowering the sword. "Who are you?!"

Harry eyed the ghost warily, realized that a ghostly sword couldn't really do anything beyond give someone a bad case of the chills, and dropped the shield. He took a long breath. It was tiring to do things with out a wand. Which was something that would have to be remedied soon. Harry shoved a thought aside about whether or not you could mail order wands and addressed the ghost. "My name is Harry Potter, and I am the new resident here."

"Oh. My name is Rudopholus. I'm quite sure I had a last name at one point, but frankly, I just don't remember it. I wasn't aware that anyone even knew where this castle was anymore. It has been quite some time since there was an owner here. In fact, I was the last."

Harry bowed slightly in acknowledgment. "As far as I know, it's been around 900 years since this place was occupied. I gained the knowledge in a rather... unusual manner. I hope that you don't mind my taking over your ancestral home? I'd be happy to make some kind of restitution..."

Harry stopped as Rudopholus burst into laughter. "Merciful heavens, no! I'm glad that someone figured out where it is! It's really dratted lonely here all by myself. I'm glad to know that someone is using the old place. No, no, make yourself at home." The ghost suddenly looked hopeful. "Unless, of course..." His voice trailed off.

Harry looked up questioningly. "If it's in my power..."

Rudopholus smiled rather sadly. "Well, if you could just come and talk to me sometimes. It does get rather lonely, and for some odd reason, I can't leave the room. It's a family curse that condemns any ghosts in the family to the place that we spent the most time." The ghost looked

mournful. "And I can't even practice or anything, since this sword goes right through things." He gave the sword a swish through a stone wall to demonstrate.

Harry was more than happy to talk to the ghost every once in a while. Especially as it looked like he wouldn't have a whole lot of visitors himself. "I'd be happy to visit you. Do you happen to know if there are any other ghosts around?"

With a look of concentration on his face, the ghost replied. "Well, when I was alive, there was a ghost that occasionally haunted the north tower, but she only came around on certain nights. I have no idea if she's still there or not. She didn't have a name that I knew, but I just called her the Singing Ghost, because that's all that she does."

"Well, thank you for the information. I do need to continue with my explorations, but I promise I'll come back as soon as I can." The ghost looked very happy at this, and politely bowed Harry out of the room.

Finally, Harry found himself on the second floor, opening the door to what was obviously the master suite. He immediately decided that this would be his room, as the defining characteristic of the huge room was large majestic windows that flooded the room with light. Since Azkaban, Harry found that enclosed or dark spaces tended to make him edgy. Not scared or unable to function, but distinctly edgy. However perfect the room, the antique furniture would have to go. Summoning up his magic, Harry began to make changes to the room.

An hour and a half later, the room was transformed into roughly what Harry intended. It had taken a lot more work than he had thought it would, seeing as transfiguration spells of this type hadn't really been fully covered in his incomplete Hogwarts education, and that learning how to make red drapes really hadn't been his focus while in Azkaban. The resulting room, however, was pleasantly lit and styled in red, gold and black. Tired from his exertions, Harry sat on the bed and stared at the bare walls. He really needed a picture or two to hang there, perhaps one of his parents, or maybe a landscape or something. At the moment, he really couldn't think of anyone other than his parents that he'd want a picture of. Sirius crossed his mind,

but Harry shoved him and Ron and Hermione out of his head. He really didn't want to think about any of them right now. It just hurt too much.

Wandering out of the room, he headed downstairs. Entering the hall again, he discovered a door that he hadn't noticed before. Curious, he shoved it open and entered. Immediately, he ducked to avoid the barrage of owls that attacked him. He had obviously discovered some sort of mailroom. It was rather large, but the sight of the owls crammed into the room caused Harry's jaw to drop. There were easily five hundred owls in the room, if not more, all anxiously looking or flying towards him, all with letters or parcels attached to a leg. In the moment Harry had stood there, seven more flew in the open window.

With a sigh, Harry realized exactly what he was going to be spending the rest of the morning doing.

COMING SOON: Harry gets his mail, ponders the sanity the magical world and reads a letter from Sirius. (A/N: Are these stupid? 'cause I can stop if you want...)

Humph. I really have some issues with this chapter, but frankly, I'd reached the point where all of my changes weren't helping, so I just put up what I had. Hopefully it wasn't too bad. Ah well, next chapter up soon to make up for this one. Please leave a review if you have the time, they are really quite encouraging to read. Even the one word ones! Have a nice rest of the week, everyone!! – krtshadow

## Chapter 10

### Owls

Harry tried to wave off the multitude of owls that had descended upon him. Most of them took the hint and returned to their previous perch, but at least fifty continued to fight each other to get to Harry. After frantically avoiding them for a couple of minutes, knocking over a chair and banging his shin in the process, Harry finally lost patience. "HOLD IT!!" Startled, the owls rose into a flurry around him and again Harry ducked for cover. Yelling loudly both so that the owls could hear and to relieve a little stress, Harry informed them in no uncertain terms what he thought of them. "You blasted, bloody owls! Back off! I can't open them all at once. Go back and I'll call you!" Hooting indignantly, the pushy owls rejoined their kin and awaited Harry's further orders.

Harry heaved a sigh of annoyance and began the long task of gathering his mail. "OK, any mail from the Ministry?" Two rather pompous looking birds rose majestically into the air and delivered their stiff and official looking letters. Deciding not to open them until he had them all organized, Harry set them in a pile and moved on. "Dumbledore?" One letter. "Snape?" Three letters, a stack of newspapers and a parcel that contained a small pamphlet that had obviously been the ministry's way of notifying the public of Voldemort's defeat. Snape was obviously making weekly reports, in lieu of any instructions from Harry on the frequency of said reports. These made a second pile.

Harry looked at the remaining owls and sighed again. It had certainly been a while since he'd received fan mail. "Any owl that is from someone that I have never met, please just return to your master." Disgruntled, more than half of the owls took flight and left out the window, winging their way back to their soon to be disappointed masters and mistresses. Harry gritted his teeth and ground out. "Any mail from Sirius Black." He hadn't even finished the last syllable before he was diving for cover again, as thirty or forty owls swooped down.

Swearing under his breath, Harry started to remove the letters. Gathering that pile together took a while. Remus Lupin's pile was smaller, only three letters, but Ron and Hermione's together nearly equaled Sirius' stack. The stack from the assorted Weasley family members was also rather large. Finally, the miscellaneous stack was finished, and Harry sat down at the table and looked at the letters stretching out in front of him. Then, with a huge sigh, he lowered his head and thumped it on the table a couple of times. He really didn't want to know what they had to say, but eventually curiosity finally got the better of him, and he reached for the letters from the ministry.

Both were written on a heavy parchment, covered with assorted seals and important looking signatures, and used nearly a hundred words when ten would do. One was an official apology, stating that Harry had been declared innocent and stating that a sizable sum had been deposited in his account at Gringotts as reparation for the years Harry had spent in Azkaban. With a sniff of disgust, Harry set this aside and opened the other letter. It was a formal declaration regarding Harry Potter being awarded the Order of Merlin, 1st class.

Harry snorted. The great gits were plenty happy to honor him now, but they hadn't been even willing to listen to his side of the story when it had been suspected that he had turned dark. Because of that hypocrisy, Harry could honestly say that he didn't particularly care that he had just received the highest honor that could be given a witch or wizard. It just didn't mean anything to him. Shrugging, Harry tossed the declaration over by the other, and moved on the Dumbledore's letter. Just as Harry suspected, it was both an apology and a thank you, combined with a few questions. Not very personal, but then Dumbledore was likely quite aware of just how low Harry's opinion of him would be.

The information from Snape was interesting, and Harry spent quite a while poring over the informative letters and articles from the Daily Prophet that concerned him. Snape gave details regarding the remaining death eater's fates, which varied depending upon their crimes. Most would be receiving a trial in a few months, once all the information and evidence had been gathered. Snape also relayed some of the Order of the Phoenix's dealings with the ministry and the honors that they had been awarded due to their 'exemplary service.'



Fudge was obviously ignoring the fact that he'd made their job much harder and that most of the Order members considered him an idiot of the first degree. Harry chuckled. He did agree with the Order on one point, at least.

However, the newspapers had seemingly attached themselves to Harry Potter as the most newsworthy topic of the day. Most of the speculation regarding his life in general bordered on funny. However, some of the ideas regarding his past and or current whereabouts were almost offensive. During his annoyed perusal of an article by Rita Skeeter, which proclaimed to the world that Harry Potter had tragically committed suicide mere moments after the defeat of You-Know-Who, Dobby arrived bearing lunch. Harry munched away while continued to attack the pile of letters. Avoiding the letters from those that he had at one time considered his best friends and family, he worked his way through the miscellaneous pile, receiving thank you letters from people like Neville, Dean, Cho and many other people who he remembered from his years at Hogwarts.

Tucking away the last letter in that pile, one from old Mrs. Figg, who was obviously connected to the wizarding world in some way, Harry faced the rest of the letters with indecision. He didn't want to read them. Yet, in some way, he did. Growling at his own confusion, Harry picked up one at random from Sirius' pile and opened it, noting that the date was just the day before yesterday. He must have gotten the most recent one, or at least one of the most recent ones, since the man had obviously been writing more than one a day.

Dear Harry,

I realize that the fact that you haven't been replying to any of my previous letters probably means that you won't reply to this one, but I hold out hope. Or maybe I'm just working off nervous frustration, writing a letter that you probably won't even read.

Anyway, I'll just repeat what I've told you before. I'm sorry that I didn't have the faith in you that you deserved. I'm so sorry that I've failed you, not only as a godfather and guardian, but as a friend. I doubt you'll ever be able to forgive me, but I know for certain that I'll never forgive myself. Out of all of the people on this earth, I should have

known that something was wrong with the picture that was painted of you. I cannot explain away my stupidity. I made a huge mistake, and it could have cost you your life.

Remus tells me to mention that although he hasn't written as many letters as I have, he feels the same way. He also says that I've gone rather overboard with the letters, but I don't think that I have. I guess I continue to hope that you might read one of them. The owls haven't returned, so I don't even know if they are finding you, or if you are alive at all, and I'm really quite worried...

I think that I'm officially just babbling now.

I'm running out of ways to put it, and my letter writing skill is leaving me. I know I don't deserve your forgiveness, not after the hypocritical way that I treated you, but if you ever want to come home, there will always be a place for you wherever I am.

Please be safe.

I miss you. I'm sorry.

Sirius

Harry crumpled the letter in his fist and stalked out of the room, leaving the rest of the letters where they were. A part of him wanted to write Sirius back, tell him it was fine, and return to being the boy that he had been. But he couldn't do that. He wasn't the same. He never would be again. The betrayal of those he had considered his only family had cut him deeply and the scars from that pain couldn't be erased by an apology. The only reason he was still even sane had nothing to do with his friends. They had deserted him, and he had had to depend on fate, luck, and the mistakes of his worst enemy for help. He couldn't trust again, because whenever he trusted someone, he got hurt. And Harry wasn't sure he'd be able to live through another horror like that again.

It was better if he just stayed away.

Azkaban had changed him, and he knew it. He could tell by the way that he reacted to things, the way that nearly nothing could bring a genuine smile to his face, that he was emotionally scarred. Harry realized this, knew he was going to have to deal with it someday, and purposefully shoved that date farther away. Although realization of a problem is the first step to healing it, it wasn't enough. He couldn't deal with the pain that thinking of those that he'd loved brought. Not yet, maybe never.

The only thing that he really knew is that he didn't want to leave the wizarding world. He wasn't a muggle, and although that would definitely be one way to become normal, Harry couldn't give up his magical side. It was too much a part of what he was. It wasn't magic's fault that a lot of the people that were blessed with the use of it were idiots. He would rather become a hermit than give up the only thing that he'd ever found in his life that he was comfortable with.

It was during his furious pacing through the halls of his new home that a thought occurred to him. Someone, somewhere, had all of his belongings. Although his trunk and the clothes and old school books that were in it were rather useless to Harry now, he did have some items of value that he wanted back. His father's invisibility cloak, for one, along with his photo album that contained the precious pictures of his parents. His wand had likely been snapped, but the other items had to be somewhere. Those little bits of the past would help to make this large castle a little more like somewhere he could call home. Harry stopped to ponder, almost desperate to keep his mind off of Sirius' letter, and wondered if anyone had discovered his secret hiding place under the floor boards at Number Four Privet Lane. That was where he last remembered having his photo album.

He tried not to think about that night much. He'd relived it for the dementors pleasure often enough as it was. Sitting quietly in his room, as normal, to be suddenly called down, dragged out of the house to meet one of Uncle Vernon's 'friends', who turned out to be a wizard. A death eater, in fact, who had handed Vernon a fat envelope in exchange for the struggling boy. Vernon hadn't even had his back turned ten seconds before Harry had heard the muttered 'stupify' that had ushered in blackness. Blackness that only faded to become a

battlefield full of bloody bodies and angry aurors that were blaming him for the carnage. Like everyone else had.

After about two seconds of deliberation, Harry decided to break his self-imposed exile in the interest of checking for his photo album. It was definitely his most prized possession, and one that he wanted back as soon as possible. The chance that it was still at the Dursley's was pretty good, and Harry liked the fact that he wouldn't have to deal with any magical beings in retrieving part of what was his.

If the Dursleys got a little well deserved comeuppance at the same time, well, who was he to complain? It wasn't as if they hadn't done enough to deserve it.

James Potter would have been proud of the scheming look on his son's face.

COMING SOON: The occupants of #4 get a very unwelcome visitor, who dishes out a little revenge, and wait... a portkey?

Heh! I am already working on the next chapter, and I am having an absolutely obscene amount of fun with it. I'll try to get it up sometime during the week, but I don't really know when. Um, a couple of other non-important things. First, I just want to repeat that I am paying for the author services, so if you want to get a free email when I update, you can sign up for that. Someone might as well get the use of it, since I'm paying for it... Also, if you want to check out other fan fiction, both HP and not, go to my user profile, I've got some links to my favorite sites there. I'm trying to get more up, but all of my links are buried in the mess I call my favorites folder and I only find them when I'm organizing, which isn't very often. Anyway, you might find something you like there... -krtshadow

## CHAPTER 11

### Uncle

Number 4 Privet Drive was a rather normal looking house on a rather normal looking street, and no one could tell that it had at one time held the young boy who would later become one of the most powerful wizards in history. If asked, the occupants of the house would tell you quite vehemently that there was no such thing as magic or wizards at all, and they certainly had never heard of anyone named Harry Potter. One might even say that they had a phobia of all things magical, to the point where they would not even watch a movie that dealt with or mentioned magic in any form.

The Dursley family had never regretted the decision that had been made regarding their nephew six years before. The money had been used to purchase a new car, and the second bedroom had returned to its original owner, who continued to fill it with his cast off and broken belongings. The most recent addition was an entire drum set, complete with a hole in the base drum where Dudley had kicked it after discovering that owning a drum set does not automatically guarantee a person musical ability.

All of the Dursleys were home this afternoon, seeing as it was Sunday and that it was considered normal for families to spend time together on Sunday afternoons. Whatever was considered normal was what the Dursleys lived for. Normalcy was to them the ultimate accomplishment, the perfect goal. Unknown to them, another member of their family, one of which they tried not to think of very much, and mostly succeeded, was at this very moment preparing to visit them. Most people would be happy to greet a nephew and cousin that they had not seen for six years, but in this one issue the Dursleys were far from normal, because the very last person on this earth that they wanted to see was Harry Potter.

They had been informed that Harry was evil (they weren't surprised) and that he had been sent to prison (nor were they sorry). So, when Vernon Dursley went to open the door after a particularly loud knock, he didn't connect the rather handsome, if slightly thin, young man with tousled hair with the scrawny boy that had once called this place

home. Assuming that this was just another salesman, Vernon reacted in the way that one normally did to such nuisances. "Not interested!" With that, he started to shut the door firmly. He was surprised to find that he could not, as the young man was leaning in and holding it open. Angered, he yelled again. "Go away!"

The next thing he knew, he was backed up into the hall and the man was shutting the door behind him. Sputtering in anger, Vernon opened his mouth to give this annoying person the tongue lashing of his life. But before he could get started, he met eyes with the intruder.

Ice cold green eyes met his. Strangely familiar green eyes. Green eyes set below messy hair that didn't quite hide a jagged scar. Vernon's eyes widened in horrified realization. The man quietly spoke, his voice as cold as his eyes, restrained anger apparent in his controlled movements. "Hello, Vernon." Speechless, Vernon tried to speak, tried to yell, but Harry spoke up again while backing the now shaking man into the living room where Petunia sat reading and Dudley lay watching TV. "It has been a long time since I've seen you." The whispered words caused Petunia and Dudley to look up. Petunia immediately connected the dots, screamed and fainted away. Dudley jumped up and tried to hide his huge bulk behind the TV, knocking it over in the process.

Harry, who seemed to be in total control of the situation, sat calmly down on the sofa and rested his booted feet on the coffee table. Vernon, desperate now, tried to sound commanding and only succeeded in sounding scared as he shouted an order. "G-get out of h-here, freak!"

Harry shot his uncle a chilling smile. "Sit down and shut up, Vernon. I won't tell you again."

Vernon sank weakly into an armchair. Dudley moaned from his huddled position behind the broken TV. Without even sparing him a glance, Harry waved a hand in his direction and Dudley went limp and crashed to the floor, the weight rattling the pictures on the wall and causing one to fall. Vernon gasped. Harry spoke, venom filling his voice. "He's only unconscious. This is between you and me. So, how much did Voldemort pay you for me?"

"I-I don't know what y-you're talking about." For the first time, Vernon began to think that mistreating the boy for all of those years had been a mistake.

"15,000 pounds, wasn't it?" Harry smirked at Vernon's horrified stare. "Didn't you know that I'd get away, Vernon? Didn't it ever occur to you that I would be a much better friend than an enemy? Did it ever even cross your tiny mind that treating me with respect would be wise?"

Vernon was reduced to telling the truth. "N-no."

Harry ignored him and smoothly moved on. "So, did you enjoy spending the money? Did it bother you that you sold your only nephew to someone who wanted to kill him?" Harry paused. "Do you get nightmares, Vernon Dursley?" Vernon shook his head mutely. It didn't seem possible, but Harry's voice became even colder. "You will now."

The frightened man cowered in the chair as Harry menacingly rose to his feet. "P-p-please! Don't k-kill me."

Harry shook his head at his uncle, although the older man hardly found it reassuring. "I won't kill you. I'm just going to give you a taste of what your selling me out made me live through." With that, Harry duplicated the effects of a dementor, watching as his uncle became caught up in his fears. Shaking and moaning in terror, Vernon fell off of the chair and curled into a not so small ball on the floor. Sputters and half-formed words seemed to be all he was capable of as he twitched on the floor. Harry let the terror consume him for a few minutes longer and then banished the effects. He walked over to the shaking man and bent down, heaving him to his feet and up against the wall. "That wasn't even ten minutes, Vernon. I lived through years of that because of you."

Vernon was a broken man. Tears were running down his face as he begged. "Please, n-no more." He had never been a brave man, and even the few minutes reliving and imagining his worst fears made him

cringe away from Harry in terror. He would be having nightmares of this day for years to come. "Please!"

Harry fisted his hands in Vernon's collar and spoke, gritting his teeth in anger. "You treated me like dirt. You called me a freak. And then you sold me to Voldemort, who used MY wand to kill one hundred and fifty nine people. Then Voldemort managed to get me framed for the murders and thrown in prison, where I lived for six years. BECAUSE OF YOU!" Harry shook Vernon hard and growled. "You can consider yourself EXTREMELY lucky that I don't kill you now." With that, Harry dropped the trembling man and stepped back, watching as he slid down the wall to land in a crumpled heap on the floor.

Stepping over his bulk, Harry walked over to Petunia and conjured a bucket of water to throw on her. Gasping, she regained consciousness and looked up into his face. With a yelp of fear, she scooted backwards until she hit the wall, horror written all over her thin, angular face. Harry purposely did nothing to dispel that fear, finding a rather wicked enjoyment in the petrified look that his aunt was sending him. "Petunia, Petunia, Petunia. What should I do with you?"

"Don't you dare touch me, you abnormal..." Petunia found herself dangling from her nephew's hands as he dragged her to her feet.

"I wouldn't finish that if I were you. I have had enough of you and yours calling me names that you deserve yourself. And, in case you haven't noticed, I am the one in charge here." Harry dropped her on the couch, where she landed with a thud. He wiped a damp hand on his trouser leg in disgust.

Petunia tried to sound brave. "You were sent to prison, so that means you are an escapee, and they will be after you." If she had hoped that this would send Harry running, she was destined to be disappointed.

Harry smiled slowly. "I was pardoned. Fully. And not two days afterwards, I killed Voldemort. You remember Voldemort, right? The evil wizard who killed my parents? The scourge of the wizarding world? So, I seriously doubt that anyone from my world is going to be



arresting me for anything just now." He left the words 'even for killing you' unspoken, but Petunia got the message remarkably well.

"Don't..." It came out more like a squeak than a word.

Harry narrowed his eyes at her and then waved his hand above her face. "Every time you say or even think the word freak, it's going to hurt you." Immediately Petunia doubled over, clutching her stomach and moaning. Harry looked on in satisfaction. A very mild pain curse combined with a thought recognition charm had a result that was exactly what Harry wanted. He considered it a perfect punishment. "Oh, and it won't go away until you haven't had an incident for six months." Harry smiled sardonically, thinking that it was extremely likely that Petunia would have to avoid the word freak until the day that she died. He really didn't care, she deserved more than that. She was the one of the family that should have cared. Harry was her sister's only son, and as such, had deserved at least respect, if not love from the older woman.

Leaving Petunia where she was, Harry stepped back over the still shivering Vernon, and headed upstairs. The smallest bedroom looked very similar to the way that Harry remembered it, but noticeably absent were the locks on the door. Harry reached to open the door, and stepped inside what had been his home away from Hogwarts for three summers. Well, three summers and two weeks, and then his world had all come crashing down. Shrugging off this depressing thought, Harry surveyed the wreckage that cluttered every inch of the room. A simple charm would get rid of it all, but Harry had a better idea. Turning back towards the door, he muttered under his breath, "Accio Dudley." A series of thumps began coming progressively nearer, and Harry realized that Dudley was ascending the stairs. A second thought became action, and Dudley became conscious as he slammed his way up the last half of the stairs and down the hall, to land in a heap at Harry's feet. He sported a livid bruise forming on his forehead, where he had obviously made contact with a step.

Dudley looked dazed. "What the..."

"Dudders, how are you? No, don't answer, I really don't want to know." At this reminder of whose feet he was lying at, Dudley looked like he was about to wet his pants.

"W-where's mum and dad?"

"Oh, they'll be fine. Eventually. You however..." Harry let his voice trail off. Dudley gulped. "You have a job to do."

"Job?" Dudley sounded horrified.

"I need to get over to the bed, and this room is a mess. You are going to clean it." Harry crossed his arms and leaned back against the doorjamb.

Dudley looked at the junk piled waist high in the room, and whined. "I won't. You just use your magic stuff and take care of it." Dudley was either braver than his parents were, or stupider. Possibly both, Harry mused, as he internally grinned at the opportunity to scare the wits out of the originator of 'Harry Hunting'.

Harry's eyes flashed angrily and Dudley cringed. Speaking with careful slowness, Harry growled. "Let me make this perfectly clear. Start working, or I will permanently reattach your shoulders to your butt. If you are lucky, that will be the only thing that I rearrange." Harry sounded as if he was extremely serious. The malicious grin plastered on his face didn't do anything to deny that.

Dudley got moving.

Twenty minutes later, a huffing Dudley had moved most of the junk into his own room, and the bed was visible. Harry hadn't said anything else to Dudley, and the obese boy had decided to keep his mouth shut for the sake of his body parts. As soon as the bed was fully in view, Harry moved forward. Dudley happily relinquished his job, and tiptoed out of the room, scared, but was curious enough to poke his head around the door to watch.

With a thought, Harry levitated the bed and the remaining items on it. Dudley restrained a gasp and watched in fear and awe as the items

hovered in mid air, the headboard grazing the ceiling and causing a few flakes of plaster to fall. Harry ignored his cousin entirely and knelt underneath the bed. Carefully prying up the loose board, he looked into the opening below. A photo album and a few moldy Cauldron Cakes were the only contents of his hiding place. A small smile graced the wizard's face as he grabbed the album. Flipping open a random page, he was greeted with the happily waving visages of his parents.

Standing to his feet, he backed out from under the still floating bed and let it fall with a thud to the ground. Dudley let out a squeak the instant Harry's eyes returned to him and headed downstairs as fast as his pudgy legs could take him, where he stepped on his father before he realized it. Harry, album in hand, was quite ready to leave this detestable house once and for all, when suddenly something in the corner of the room caught his attention.

Sitting inconspicuously on the shelf between Dudley's never cracked copies of Bleak House and The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes lay a familiar looking book. Harry stepped closer and read the spine. Quidditch Through the Ages. Harry grinned. It must have been out of his trunk, and had gotten mixed in with Dudley's books when whoever had picked up his stuff had missed it. Considering Dudley's phobia of reading, it had merely stayed on the shelf for all of these years, gathering dust. Reaching over, he touched the book, intending to pick it up and take it with him. However, the instant that his finger hit the bright red cover, he knew that his previous assumption was totally wrong. The jerking tug that accompanied a portkey's activation alerted him to this fact, and although reflex made him yank his hand back, it was too late.

Had Dudley stayed around, he would have seen his cousin disappear from the smallest bedroom of Number 4 Privet Drive, swearing loudly at his own stupidity.

COMING SOON: A discussion with the portkey's maker, and other interesting developments.

Thanks for the reviews, keep 'em coming! =) Also, could someone from England tell me what the drinking age is there? As in when a

person is allowed to purchase alcohol? In the muggle world, of course. Thanks, it may or may not figure in to the story, but I started thinking about it and ended up very curious. –krtshadow

## CHAPTER 12

### Tension

Harry was still swearing when he landed with a thump in a darkened room. However, due to the fact that he didn't know where he was and who might be lurking in the dark ready to attack, he, without interrupting his flow, switched from verbal to mental curses. Azkaban does quite a lot to expand one's vocabulary, and Harry made full use of that expansion as he castigated himself. The portkey had been very cleverly disguised, but he still should have been more wary. Whoever had set the trap knew him pretty well, because there would be almost no chance that he wouldn't have picked up his favorite book on Quidditch.

He lay quietly on the floor where he had landed, ears straining for the whisper of movement that would mean that someone else was in the room. After a long minute, he soundlessly moved to a crouching position and muttered, "Lumos." A ball of blue light formed above his hand and Harry was able to recognize the room that he stood in. He should recognize it, he had certainly been there often enough.

Harry Potter was at Hogwarts yet again, specifically in the Headmaster's office. The room was dark and void of either Dumbledore or Fawkes. Harry growled under his breath at the trickery that Dumbledore had played, before grudgingly admitting to himself that it had been well planned. Harry was unsure if the portkey book had been placed at his original disappearance six years ago, or if it had only been on the shelf a few weeks. It had been a logical thing that Harry would return to the Dursleys at some point, although Harry doubted that Dumbledore knew of Harry's photo album or of his hiding place in the smallest bedroom.

Harry sat down in the chair before the desk and let the light extinguish itself from his hand. Sitting in perfect darkness, he thought for a moment. Leaving the castle in broad daylight without being seen would be difficult, if not impossible. He was tired from his day's exertions, the combined effort of wandlessly raising several shields, decorating his room, and the whole Dursley intimidation scene was weighing on his system. Harry rubbed a hand along the cover of the

album, allowing a small smile to grace his lips. At least he'd gotten his parents back. At least, all Harry had ever owned of them.

Harry was just trying to decide on what to do when the decision was taken out of his hands. Hurried footsteps sounded in the stairway and Harry moved quickly to stand by the wall out of the immediate range of fire. The room lit up in preparation of the headmaster's return and Harry held himself ready. He didn't think that Dumbledore would attack him, but in case this portkey had been left over from years back, he might not be expecting anyone to be in his office. That idea was scrapped as Albus Dumbledore, complete with overly long beard and half-moon glasses, entered the room with wand drawn. Dumbledore knew.

Albus had been in the middle of a pleasant conversation with several visitors and those staff members that chose to make Hogwarts their home over the summer holidays. In fact, he had been enjoying a very succulent lemon tart and had been quite surprised when the wards of Hogwarts gave that particular quiver that meant that a portkey destination had been utilized somewhere in the castle. Further attention given to the magical ties that he held as headmaster showed him that his very own office was the place in question. Shocked, he hurried out of the room, ignoring the questions that were shot his way by the confused and slightly concerned diners. There were enough magical items and texts in his office to cause a lot of problems if they fell into the wrong hands. It was most curious however, that someone had even managed to make a portkey to have a destination of Hogwarts. Dumbledore or someone he had authorized was usually the only ones to be able to do so. Unless... Dumbledore hurried even more, because he now had a pretty good suspicion of who was currently occupying his inner sanctum.

This was going to be a very interesting discussion, he mused as he neared the gargoyle. Very interesting indeed, if what he suspected was true and the Boy Who Lived had been unwillingly transported to the office of someone he had no reason to like or trust. The aged headmaster shook his head in sorrow. It could have been so much different. If he had only taken the time to double-check, even though the evidence had seemed airtight, the world might be so much different. Then again, he mused, Voldemort is dead, and it had been

accomplished with a minimum of casualties. Perhaps, even though they may have lost Harry, it was for the best. Even this thought didn't make it hurt any less.

So it was with a heavy heart that Albus Dumbledore entered his office, wand in hand just in case he was wrong about the identity of the intruder, and prepared for what was likely to be a very stressful interview with a young man that he had once mistakenly abandoned. As soon as he entered the room and confirmed his suspicions, he slid the wand back up his spacious sleeve and moved to sit behind the desk. Harry followed his every move with cold eyes, not moving from his position of leaning up against the wall. Albus spoke apologetically. "I'm sorry about the portkey. I believe that I forgot to have it removed all those years ago. However, I'm not sorry that you are here, Harry, we've all been wondering where you were." Albus motioned towards a chair, although he had very little hope that Harry would sit.

True to his predictions, Harry ignored the friendly motion and spoke. "I was recuperating."

"Ahh. Yes, I do hope you are all right now?" Without waiting for an answer, the aged headmaster continued. "You look very well, if I do say so."

"Considering, you mean." Harry looked almost amused. In a very stone cold, angry sort of way.

"I hope the Dursleys haven't sustained any... serious damage?"

Harry's facial expression didn't move. "That's none of your concern." Harry was slightly annoyed at not having the opportunity to finish the confrontations with his former guardians. He'd planned one more good scare for them and then the lingering horror of a promised return visit. Whether or not he would go back or not was something he hadn't yet decided, but it would have been quite nice to think of the Dursleys and know that they half expected to come through the door at any moment. Harry quite favored psychological torture over physical. It took so much more planning, but a lot less actual work. Why expend energy scaring someone when you can let them scare themselves?

Albus changed the subject. "I have something here for you. I have been pondering on how to get it too you, as it didn't seem prudent to send it by owl." Rising, he slowly walked over to a shelf and brought down a box. Opening it with care, he brought out something that Harry recognized immediately.

"My wand?" Harry was surprised, and the façade slipped slightly. "I would have thought that it had been snapped."

Albus winced. "It was a very near thing, but it was decided to keep it whole on the grounds that it was an advantage against its brother wand." Albus would have loved to say that he had kept it against the day that he could give it back, but that wasn't true, and honesty was the wisest course in this situation. Especially since one issue that Harry very likely had with him was the lack of communication regarding Dumbledore's knowledge of Harry's destiny. "I don't know if you need it anymore, considering the fact that it wasn't even necessary the other night."

"Hmm." Harry ignored the rather obvious hint for an explanation. "I don't really need it, but it lessens the energy output. I'm getting tired of sleeping..." This was muttered under his breath, but the headmaster heard anyway. Unable to do anything with the information, he filed it away with the other unanswered questions about this unusual young man.

"Harry, I would like to apologize..."

Harry waved a hand. "Don't. Just don't. I really don't want to hear it." He sighed, and suddenly looked much older than he should have. Then, almost visibly shrugging to change the thoughts running through his mind, he reached for his wand.

Albus tried to warn him. "Harry, wait..." But it was too late. The powerful wand, untouched by its true master for so many years, exploded with power, sending sparks, smoke, and light in every conceivable direction. Moving with an alacrity that Albus was unaware that he still possessed, the headmaster leapt out of his chair and behind the desk.



As soon as it was even remotely safe, Albus stood, frantically scanning the hazy area in front of the desk. "Harry!"

A cough sounded from the smoke, and a frantically waving hand moved some fresh air Harry's way. Albus sighed with relief and waved his wand, thoroughly removing the smoke from the office. Harry stood in the middle of the room, shaking his head. Streaks of black covered his face and glasses, and his hair was literally standing on end. Harry blinked, and for a split second, a glimmer of humor shone in his eyes. He drawled. "Well, that was interesting." And then it was gone, and his eyes returned to the remoteness that had become normal, but even that small glint and the sarcastic remark gave Albus a burst of hope. It was now his opinion that Harry would heal. It might take a while, but the humor of his father and the persistence of his mother would shine through in their child and give him the ability to move on.

Albus held back his own smile. Harry did look rather funny, but now was probably not the best time to comment on that. "I apologize, Harry, I should have warned you about the possibilities of wand backlash."

Harry shrugged it off. "I should have known." Wincing, he carefully uncurled his reddened fingers from around the wand and transferred it to the other hand, shaking out the injured members carefully.

"You would have had no way of knowing what to expect."

Harry's response to that was a raised eyebrow, effectively communicating that Albus didn't have any idea what Harry did and did not know. The following silence stretched to the point of being uncomfortable, as Albus, somewhat flustered, tried to think of some way to stop Harry from disappearing again. Harry, for his part, was remarkably calm, standing in front of the desk like he had all of the time in the world. Deciding not to use the wand again quite yet, he wandlessly fixed his hair and cleaned himself up a bit. Psychological torture didn't work only on the Dursleys, it seemed. It was Harry's opinion that Dumbledore could do with a little worrying about him,

seeing as the headmaster hadn't done near enough of it six years ago.

Albus was saved from further conversational efforts by the sound of footsteps on the stairwell. Harry's response was interesting as well. He took one long step over to the side of the room and placed himself in a position where he could watch both the door and the desk, while being mostly hid from view from the door. Albus sighed, feeling rather hurt that Harry felt threatened in Hogwarts and was taking the steps to defend himself if necessary. The headmaster wished that he could tell Harry that the people in this castle would sooner cut off their wand hands than cause him any more pain, physical or emotional. However, Albus knew that Harry wouldn't believe him. Trust was not something that had ever come naturally to the young Potter and the trials that had dogged his life had only accentuated that character trait.

The door burst open and the two people that Albus really wanted to see Harry came in. If he had been alone, the headmaster would have chortled in happiness. This was working out even better than he could have hoped. First the glimmer of humor in Harry's eyes, and now the inescapable meeting of people that Harry would almost definitely rather avoid. Sirius came in first, Remus following sedately behind. Neither noticed Harry. Sirius spoke. "Albus, are you OK? You went tearing out of the Great Hall, and then there was an explosion." He sniffed and wrinkled up his nose. "It smells like smoke in here. What happened?"

Remus scanned the room as Sirius spoke, obviously looking for the source of the explosion, and his eyes nearly doubled in size as they met Harry's. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but nothing came out. Meanwhile, Dumbledore quietly answered. "We had a little case of wand backlash, but no one was hurt."

Sirius looked confused. "We?"

Dumbledore opened his mouth to answer, but Remus beat him to it, finally managing to make his vocal cords work. "Harry?" Harry remained inscrutable at the recognition, but inwardly he was fighting the urge to bang his head against something hard. He wasn't ready for this yet! The logical part of him realized that if it had been left up to

him, it never would have been, but the emotional part of his brain didn't care about any of that and just wanted out of this thrice bedamned castle. Harry briefly considered just walking out the still open door, but his pride gave a little twinge at the thought of that. It was a little too much like running away. He didn't need these people, and therefore, he didn't need to run from them either.

The only other thing that he was really sure about was that he'd never been so confused in his whole life. He didn't like it, but didn't have the first clue about fixing it.

Sirius' response to the situation would have been quite humorous in any other setting. At Remus' quietly spoken word, the man froze solid, all blood draining from his face. With excruciating slowness, he turned to meet Harry's icy green eyes. "Harry?" The name came out as a squeak.

Harry didn't know what to do. The only thing that came to mind was cursing Sirius senseless, and that didn't really seem to fit the situation. So, after enduring the shocked stares of his father's best friends for about a minute, he lost patience. Turning back to Dumbledore, he was sure he saw a gleam of amusement at the situation in the aged blue eyes. Harry didn't appreciate that, but was in no position to complain. Stuffing his wand in his sleeve, he took a deep breath. "I'll just be leaving then." With that he started to edge towards the door. An ordered retreat couldn't always be considered running away, after all.

He didn't get very far. Both Sirius and Remus yelled in unison. "WAIT!" Harry paused, startled, and then watched in shock as the two older men exchanged a meaningful look with one another and hit the floor, chanting in a foreign language, long strings of syllables that Harry couldn't decipher.

Harry would have felt a whole lot better about the situation if Dumbledore hadn't looked puzzled for a moment, and then positively gleeful.

COMING SOON: A very old spell, and Harry loses his temper at Dumbledore, Remus, Sirius and anyone else stupid enough to get in his way.

I love reviews! I love reviewers! When I'm feeling the love, I write faster! Get the hint? Thank you to those who have already reviewed. It really makes my day. – krtshadow

## CHAPTER 13

### Explosion

Harry sighed, trying desperately to keep his temper in check. This had to be the most mixed up, emotionally unbalanced, strange day that he could ever remember the misfortune of having. He had went from waking up in a castle that hadn't had a human occupant for a very long time, to reading mail from what seemed like most of the wizarding world, to revenge on the worst muggles ever. Now he was standing the office of the person that he blamed most for his screwed up life and his godfather and one time professor were kneeling at his feet, obviously engaging in some spell that Harry had no idea about, but that probably effected him somehow.

Harry turned to Dumbledore and looked straight in the ancient eyes. "What is this?"

Dumbledore tried to wipe the smile off of his face, but the twinkle in his eye was shining full force. He stood to look over his desk at the two men on the floor, who had stopped chanting now and seemed to be waiting for something. "I believe they are attempting to apologize to you in a rather unique manner."

Harry resisted the urge to point out that that was obvious and gritted his teeth. "Dumbledore, I'm really not in the mood for any of your 'let's hide information from Harry' games. What is this?"

Dumbledore continued, ignoring the not so subtle insult. "They seem to have initiated an ancient bonding ritual. Which one I do not know, but it seems to be very powerful."

This was true. The feeling of unfinished magic in the air was almost palpable, and the unsteady throb of it was beginning to give Harry a headache on top of the one that he was already getting from pure frustration. "A bonding ritual?" Harry focused very hard and managed to unclench his teeth. "Why?"

Dumbledore looked of into the distance and a thoughtful look fell over his face. "If I could just remember the specifics... Ah, yes."

Dumbledore looked surprised, and then fascinated. "After all these years, you would think that I would stop being surprised by what they come up with." Dumbledore adopted a lecturing tone. Harry took to counting to a hundred by one tenths to keep his patience and temper intact. "This particular spell is perhaps the oldest known bonding spell. To my knowledge, It hasn't been used in hundreds of years, both because it is difficult to do and the fact that it is dangerous to the casters. Traditionally it was utilized when there was a great wrong done to one person by another. In an effort to mend the rift, the person at fault would present himself to the wronged, swearing to be his bondservant until the wrong was erased. The spell was formulated to give the wronged due notice of the offering, to hold the wrongdoer to his word, and to make the whole process go smoother."

Harry spoke clearly, not wanting to misunderstand. "So, what you are telling me is that Black and Lupin just made themselves my slaves in some misguided effort to force me to forgive them?"

Dumbledore blinked. "Well, I'm not sure I would put it that way..."

"I would." The unforgiving tone of his voice caused all three of the other occupants in the room to flinch slightly. Ignoring that, Harry continued. "So, how do I say 'No.' in whatever language they were using?"

The room was silent for another long moment. Dumbledore began to look a little worried. "You can't refuse it."

Harry raised both eyebrows now. "Just watch me."

Dumbledore leaned forward, placing his elbows on the desk and clasping his hands. "No, Harry, I mean the magic is initiated now and there must be a fulfillment. The spell must be finished." As if to emphasize this fact, the vibration of the magic stepped up a notch, becoming even louder.

Harry took a deep breath, paused, counted to ten, and then lost his temper anyway. Raising his voice, he spoke as calmly as he possibly could under the circumstances. It wasn't very calm. "That had better not mean what I think it meant!! What kind of an apology is this? I

don't want them to apologize to me, I don't want them to be my servants, and I sure as bloody hell don't want them anywhere near me!" Harry moved towards the door with purpose, fully intending to walk out the door and then take off running. He didn't get very far. He hadn't moved three steps beyond the kneeling men when the feeling of magic hit him over the head. Somehow the spell knew that he was trying to leave without finishing it. Pain hit him between the eyes like a runaway bludger, and only his prior experience with great amounts of pain kept him from crying out. But even that experience wasn't enough to keep him on his feet.

He crumpled to the floor, unaware of the startled cry of the headmaster, or Sirius and Remus struggling to leave their kneeling position to come to help him. Breathing deeply, Harry crouched down low. Extending his power, he blocked the pain to a manageable level and scanned the area. He didn't like spells that effected him with out him knowing why. In his mind, he was able to see the room in a magical sense. At first, he was nearly blinded, as the room was full of magical objects and spells of every kind.

It took a minute, but he was able to block most of that, and focus on the spell that was effecting him. He cursed under his breath when he saw the strength of the thread of magic coming from his godfather and former professor. However much he hated them right now, they seemed to be sincere, and this particular magic was of the type that was powered by emotion. It was only the strength of the spell that was keeping Harry from leaving. As powerful as he was, Harry still might have been able to break the connection, but it was strong enough to make it a very touchy thing. Even if he could snap the thread, it would likely backlash on the others, and could easily hurt or kill them. Harry felt an extremely small twinge of shame that he considered it anyway.

He growled under his breath. Why couldn't they just leave him alone? Were they really so stupid as to think that he either needed or wanted them back in his life? Especially now, after what they did to him? Harry would have been willing to stay in Azkaban for much longer in exchange for knowing that his godfather and friends hadn't believed that he was guilty. But, for reasons he couldn't understand, they had

actually thought him capable of wholesale murder. Fine, so he had to accept the bond, or kill them, and he wasn't ready to do that, but they'd soon find that forgiveness was not a word that Harry Potter understood very well.

Utilizing the magic, he accepted the bond, utterly ignoring the fact that he was supposed to use words to finish the spell. It was just easier to do it this way. The bond solidified, and Harry returned his vision to normal just in time to see both of the kneeling men take a nose-dive into the floor. They had been stuck in place, but had been straining to reach him. When the bond was accepted, the magic holding them was gone, and inertia took over with predictable results. It would have been funny if he hadn't been so furious. Harry rolled to his feet in a swift movement.

Sirius managed to pull his face out of the carpet first. "Harry, are you...?"

Harry whirled and shot the man whom he had once considered the closest thing he'd have to a father a glare that could have melted steel. "Don't call me Harry. Ever. Again." Ignoring the stricken look on Sirius' face, he turned back to Dumbledore.

However, before he could open his mouth, Dumbledore spoke up. "Harry, I am sorry, but you will have to accept this bond, at least temporarily. If you don't, it could harm or kill..."

Harry shifted his glare to the headmaster, and said with extreme sarcasm. "Thanks. I know. It's tempting, but I've BEEN to Azkaban." Everyone winced. Harry ignored them. "It's done. I'm leaving now." He didn't really feel that he could manage any sentences longer than about five words.

Dumbledore looked surprised at this and ventured a question. "Would you mind explaining how you learned to do these things wandlessly?"

Harry leaned forward, placing his tightly clenched fists on Dumbledore's desk. "YES, I mind. I don't like you, I don't trust you, and I don't have to explain myself to you. Not anymore."



Dumbledore looked frustrated. "But, Harry..."

Harry released the tiny vestige of control that he had still had over his temper. Not caring that he was yelling in the headmaster's face, he proceeded to tell him exactly what he thought of him. He managed to do it in about five extremely foul swear words, ones which brought a tinge of red to Dumbledore's cheeks, and caused both Remus and Sirius' eyes to widen. Having got that off of his chest, he continued, still livid. "You had your chance! If you wanted a loyal servant that followed your every command and obeyed your every wish, you had the chance. I'd have DIED for you, for any of you. And you SHOULD have known that. I don't owe you anything, Albus Dumbledore, but contempt."

He turned to stare at the two marauders, who were now on their feet. They both took a step back as he advanced on them, rage written all over his face. "AND as for YOU, I trusted you. BOTH of you. And you just threw that away, like a piece of trash. Well, maybe that's all I ever was to you. And to think I thought you were different than the Dursleys. At least THEY never acted like they cared for me, so I knew what to expect. I suppose you expected me to just treat you like saviors, coming to rescue me from hell, TOTALLY IGNORING the fact that YOU..." He turned back to Dumbledore, who was looking rather shaken. "...ALL of you, left me in there to ROT in the first place!"

Taking a deep breath, he calmed himself slightly and snarled at the two wide-eyed men in front of him. "Go. Since I have NO CHOICE in the matter, you'll have to come home with me." He leaned forward into Sirius' face. "I hope YOU are happy." The expression on his face left nothing to be imagined. Harry Potter certainly was not happy.

They went. Harry turned to Dumbledore one last time. "One word of advice, Headmaster. If any other children come here, desperate for guidance and someone to look up to, do them a favor and tell them right off that you're going to use them and then abandon them. In the long run, it's far kinder." With that, he went out the door, slamming it behind him with a bang that shook one of the portraits off of the wall, much to its occupant's dismay.

Albus Dumbledore, now feeling anything but gleeful, let out a long sigh and buried his head in his hands, lost in thoughts that he didn't relish. His earlier hope seemed rather far away right now. Far away, but not gone. He didn't think he'd ever be able to give up all hope that at least some part of the happy child he remembered would return. At the moment, it just seemed rather hard to imagine.

Severus Snape, who had followed Black and Lupin up to the office, and had therefore heard most of the incident, allowed himself the pleasure of a very small smirk. Potter certainly knew how to choose his words. Deciding that now probably wasn't a good time to interrupt the Headmaster's musings, he headed back down the corridor to the library. Potter would probably be interested to know the details of the spell he'd been forced into, and Snape had been using the ingredients that Harry had sold him to great extent. He didn't mind putting in a little extra effort for a good cause, and messing up whatever Black and Lupin were up to ranked right up there in his top ten lifelong goals.

He smirked again, remembering the cowed looks on his old childhood rival's faces as they had passed him in the hall, followed by an irate Potter. He only wished he could be there to see the pain Potter would put them through. Well deserved pain, and probably more mental than physical, but pain none the less. Blissfully, Snape imagined the possibilities, but finally surmised, regretfully, that Potter probably wouldn't want any torture suggestions included in his next report. "Bugger, and I had some good ideas, too."

COMING SOON: Return to the castle, and a few miscellaneous conversations, none of which are very helpful to anyone concerned.

I know, I know, I kinda wanted Harry to blow their heads off too, or at least beat them senseless, but frankly, that would have really screwed up my plot line. I had to make this happen, because with the way that Harry is turning out, I don't think he'd ever leave the castle again, and Harry the Hermit isn't very fun to write about. Technically, I guess I could, but I think that it would be rather boring. Chapter 15 Harry talks to Dobby, Chapter 16 Harry talks to the ghost, Chapter 17 Harry talks to the wall... see what I mean? So, Harry now has a few

house... er... castle guests. Can he hold back his homicidal impulses? Can they get through to him? I guess we'll find out.

## CHAPTER 14

### Questions

Harry noticed Snape standing outside the office, glared because that was just the kind of mood he was in, and continued on his way, following Black and Lupin to the apparation point. His fury was mostly abated, as he wasn't one to dwell on things that couldn't be helped, and a good part of his anger had been let out in the headmaster's office, but he still wished that he'd never picked up that blasted book. That wish was closely followed by the deep desire that he'd just walked straight out of the office as soon as he gotten there. Dumbledore wouldn't have caused a fuss. But, no, he had to try to play mind games with them, and it had backfired on him. This was just so typical of his life. Whatever could go wrong, probably would. He stifled a snort. He was a poster child for Murphy's law. He'd just have to figure out how to safely break the bond as soon as possible. Meanwhile, they would just have to stay away from him. For the sake of their safety, if not the sake of his sanity.

He didn't speak a word as they walked through the mostly empty halls of Hogwarts. The few teachers that they ran across stared in shock and then realized that Harry Potter looked angry. Most wisely came to the decision that now was probably not the time to try to initiate polite conversation.

The exception was Peeves, who came floating through a wall and noticed the trio of men walking below him. "Why, it's Potter the rotter! Ha haa ha ha ha!" Adopting a vaguely familiar singsong, he started to chant, while turning slow somersaults in midair. "Oh Potter, you rotter, who have you killed n..."

The annoying poltergeist didn't get any farther in his derogatory little rhyme. With a growl that caused Sirius and Remus to turn in alarm, Harry drew his wand. "Peeves." The word was drawn out and deadly sounding. The poltergeist shut up and turned in surprise. "Shut up. Or I will kill YOU now." Nobody listening had any doubt that he would do what he threatened, regardless of the fact that, technically, you couldn't kill a poltergeist.

For some reason, Peeves couldn't think up anything cute to say in response to that. Flipping one more time, he decided that a hurried retreat was in order, and zipped through the ceiling to find someone a little less dangerous to pester. Which ended up being Snape, as the potions master made his way to the library for a little investigative research.

Returning his wand to his sleeve, Harry silently moved forward, staring straight ahead and taking the lead. There were no other incidents until they reached the apparation point. Remus and Sirius exchanged a 'what do we do now' look, not knowing where to go to, but not especially wanting to risk asking Harry anything right then.

Harry solved the problem by huffing angrily, grabbing their respective shoulders, and apparating home.

Forced apparation is not comfortable under the best of circumstances, and Harry was in no mood to make their landing soft. So, it was with a rather hard jolt that the two men arrived at the place that they would be calling home for a while. Harry waited grimly while they clambered to their feet, awkwardly brushing dirt off of their robes. Then, he stepped through the invisibility shield. Unsure why they were in the middle of the forest and where Harry had just disappeared to, they followed.

Harry moved towards the door, unaware that he was leaving his two newest acquisitions back at the apparation point where they stood gaping. When Harry had mentioned going home, they had assumed that he meant a house of some type, possibly even a place in a muggle neighborhood. They were not expecting a castle. Even in the fading light of dusk, the sight before them was amazing. There was no doubt, it was a modestly sized castle, and one that looked very old. Remus and Sirius exchanged startled glances and then, remembering the situation, hurried to catch up to Harry, who was just entering the door.

Both were unsure about what to expect from the silent wizard whom they were following. They had shared several long discussions about the risks of the undertaking that they had embarked on, and both had decided that the possible gains were worth the risks. They would do

what was necessary to make sure that Harry was happy. He deserved nothing less. Remus had even forced Sirius to accept the possible eventuality that Harry would be happier without them, and if that became apparent, they would figure out some way to leave him in peace. But before that could be decided, they would have to observe Harry. Both men were concerned that Harry might not be totally sane. So far, he had seemed mentally stable, but they found it hard to believe that six years in Azkaban had had so little effect on Harry. He was just human, after all. And if he needed help, they wanted to be there for him.

Oblivious to their good, if slightly misguided, intentions, Harry stopped in the entryway and called. "Dobby?"

With a pop, the small house elf appeared. "Harry sir brought visitors!"

Harry mumbled something under his breath that Remus thought sounded suspiciously like, "I wish I knew why..."

Dobby continued, rubbing his long fingered hands together eagerly. "Harry sir want formal dinner?" The short little elf looked absolutely thrilled at the idea of all of the extra work that that would entail.

Harry almost shouted. "No! That won't be necessary." He was having enough problems dealing with his emotions regarding their presence in the castle itself, and there would be no way he could handle a sit down, conversation is mandatory type dinner. He'd end up killing them, and for his father's sake, he didn't really want to do that, however tempting it was in his current state of mind. Dobby looked somewhat disappointed, but Harry didn't particularly care one way or another. "In fact, I'm going to bed. Get them adjoining rooms somewhere, I suggest the first floor."

For the first time in what had turned out to be a very long day, a little exhaustion showed in Harry's eyes and movement. It was obvious to him that he still wasn't fully recovered from the battle with Voldemort, and on top of that, he'd had a very stressful day, what with exploration, the Dursleys, and the whole Hogwarts fiasco. With that, he headed for the stairs, not even sparing a glance for Remus and Sirius. At the bottom of the stairs, he turned and spoke to Dobby once

more. "It's probably going to be a couple of days again, but wake me up if it's more than four."

"Yes, sir, Harry sir. Dobby do that." As Harry disappeared up the stairs, Sirius and Remus exchanged puzzled glances. To say that they had a lot of questions was a distinct understatement. At the same time, their gaze returned to the elf in front of them, who was patiently waiting to direct them to their rooms. Identical thoughts ran through both men's minds. It was interrogation time for Dobby.

"So, Dobby, have you been working here long?" Remus smoothly took over the questioning as they walked down the hall. Sirius left it to his friend, subtlety was not his strong point and it was necessary to be very careful regarding the house elf's sense of loyalty. If either of the men offended the elf, or made him suspect that he was being grilled for information that his master might not want them to know, he'd just disappear, or worse, tell Harry about it, and their only potential source of information would dry up.

"Dobby work since Dobby start work for Harry sir." Dobby grinned widely, obviously elated that he had Harry for a master.

Sirius rolled his eyes from behind the elf's back. This was going to take a while. Remus didn't let this singularly unhelpful comment hinder him, though, and he continued. "Oh, really? This is a very nice castle, have you always worked for the owners here?"

Dobby led them down another corridor and answered. "Castle empty, very dirty when Dobby come. Harry sir first owner long time." The elf looked agitated. "Dust, dirt everywhere. Dobby and Winky work all day, Harry sir sleepy."

Remus latched on to the last few words. "Harry sir sleepy? What does that mean? Has he been ill?" Concern that didn't have to be faked tinged his words.

Dobby's eyes went wide. "Dobby take care of Harry sir. Not wake up for long time. Sleepy for twenty-four days. Dobby worried, but Harry sir wake today."

Remus only just managed to keep his jaw from falling open. Twenty-four days? He quickly counted days in his head. This had been the first day Harry had been awake since the last time they had seen him? That must have been one monster case of magical exhaustion. Then he winced, sharing a glance with Sirius, who, from the bleak look in his face had just had a similar thought. Harry hadn't had any time to process anything and here they were jumping on him, forcing him to deal with them, when to him, he'd only been out of Azkaban about four days. They were lucky he hadn't dumped them in the Arctic somewhere, bond or no bond. However, it was too late to change things now. They would have to make the best of the situation.

Just how they were going to do that, however, was up in the air. Dobby showed them into a vacant sitting room with two bedrooms and a bathroom connected, and left them with directions on how to find the dining hall. Sirius immediately sat down on the rather old looking sofa in the sitting room and buried his head in his hands. Remus briefly inspected both bedrooms and then came to join him. "I don't know about you Padfoot, but I have even more questions than I did before I saw Harry and I honestly didn't think that that was possible."

Sirius looked up and nodded. "Yeah. Like, where'd he get the castle? Was this whole bonding thing a good idea? We thought that he needed someone around and that this would both give him that and give us a chance to apologize in a more meaningful way. But he was seriously angry, and now that I think about it, I see why. We really didn't leave him much choice." Filled with nervous energy, Sirius stood and began to pace in circles. "But he looked fine, Remus, he looked healthy, and why? If he just woke up today like the house elf said, then why didn't he look ill? He just got out of Azkaban, and not only does he have powers he didn't have when he went in, he doesn't seem to have been affected by the dementors. He doesn't even seem to be depressed. Just angry." Sirius switched directions, running his hand through his hair distractedly. "Really angry. I feel like an idiot. Maybe we should have just left him alone. But then he would have been insane or something and I'd have wished we had tried to help him. And why'd he collapse in Dumbledore's office? Do you think that he's sick, Remus?"



Remus, who had been trying to fit a word or two in Sirius' rather disjointed tirade for about five minutes, took a deep breath, realized that Sirius was just worried, and answered as many of the questions as he could remember. "I don't know where he got the castle or why he seemed to be able to shrug off the affects of Azkaban. I think that the reason that he fell in the Headmaster's office was something to do with him trying to refuse the bond, but I'm not sure." Sirius began to look as if he was feeling very guilty, as he slumped on to the nearest chair with a morose look in his eyes.

Remus hurried on, knowing that the other man would tear himself to absolute shreds over things that were already over if given half the chance. It had been nearly eight years since Sirius had broken out of Azkaban, but he still struggled with the emotional issues brought on by that hellhole. Which made it even more curious that Harry had escaped unscathed. Or had he? "I can't tell you if it was a good idea to do this. We knew it was a gamble. And, yes, he was angry. But even if he figures out how to break the bond and throws us out after a while, maybe just being in contact with other humans will help him somehow. Maybe not to accept us, but it might help him with others. We'll just have to make the best of it now." Remus let a small, tight smile cross his lips. "Remember, it could be worse."

Sirius looked up. "What do you mean?"

"He hasn't thrown us in the dark smelly dungeons this place probably has."

"Or maybe he just hasn't thought of it yet." Sirius was obviously determined to be gloomy.

"Yes, well, that could be." And the slightly scary thing was, as angry as Harry had been earlier, neither man could totally rule out the possibility.

COMING SOON: Battles, eavesdroppers and obvious results.

Sorry it's kinda slow, but I'm trying to focus on both the feelings of everyone and the reasons they do what they do, instead of just

focusing on events. I think that that is what makes an angst story good. It is certainly making it longer than I had expected. Um, folks, we're looking at around thirty chapters now. Maybe more. rubs head What have I gotten myself into? Oh well, I'm having fun. Anyway, I had some extra time (and nice reviews!) this weekend, so you guys get two chapters this week!! Next one will be up normal time, on either Friday or Saturday. Thanks for the reviews! – krtshadow

## CHAPTER 15

### Skirmishes

Three more days passed before either of the two men saw any sign of the master of the castle. After some careful exploration, Remus discovered the library and its piles of uncategorized books. After some argument, the werewolf was able to talk his friend into helping him work towards organizing the room into some semblance of normalcy. Dobby seemed grateful for the help, and didn't bother them, leaving them to work in silence. Well, as much silence as a room can have when the legendary Padfoot and Moony are ensconced within.

In other words, it occasionally got quite noisy. Which was usually Sirius' fault. But even the loud crash as an entire row of bookshelves fell to the floor and the subsequent, also loud, argument regarding exactly whose fault said accident was, didn't bring Harry out into view. They assumed that he was asleep, but didn't really know for sure, and frankly, after the show of fury that he'd shown at Hogwarts, they didn't particularly want to go looking for him.

It was in the afternoon of the third day, and the library was beginning to look better. Nearly a quarter of the books had been placed on shelves already, and many of the rest were organized into neat piles. Remus was carefully placing several very old books under a protection spell when Sirius came around the corner of one of the shelves, clearly bored with shelving. "What are you doing, Moony?"

The werewolf frowned in concentration and finished the spell. "Several of these are very valuable. They are also extremely old, and since Harry might want to sell them, I thought it best to put a couple of spells on them to keep them from falling apart anymore than they already are." He carefully placed the books in a stack on the library's solitary table.

Sirius looked over his shoulder, intrigued. "How valuable is valuable?"

Remus smiled. "This library is very dated, most of the books are over a thousand years old. If Harry just sells these four books, if he can

find a buyer, that is, and Hogwarts will probably want at least one of them, he will be able update the library to very near current day."

"Oh. That valuable."

"A couple of these books had been thought lost forever, or the only remaining copies held in private collections. I doubt very much that Harry is even aware that he has a literal fortune in his library." Remus' eyes glowed. "He even had two copies of this one. Two copies of a book thought lost forever!" He sounded incredulous. He pointed to the one on top. "A very old treatise on different dark curses and how to counteract them. I only know about it because it was considered a great tragedy when the last known copy burnt in a library fire about six hundred years ago. They named the fire after that one book." Sirius picked one copy up and looked at it curiously. It didn't look all that valuable, just rather old, but what did he know about books? Remus continued. "It's nearly priceless." Sirius hurriedly, but carefully, put it down. "And he can keep one copy and sell the other. I'd love to read it, but I think that I'd better ask him first, and I'm not about to try just yet."

Sirius blinked at the onslaught of information, and was about to change the subject and ask Remus if he'd found any information regarding the past owners of the castle, when for the first time, he heard another voice besides theirs echo in the halls.

What surprised him was that it didn't really sound like Harry's voice. He looked at Remus to see if he'd heard anything, and found the werewolf with his head tilted slightly. Obviously, he had also heard the voice. Sharing a cautious glance, they moved out of the library, and down the hall.

Inside the room that they were fast approaching, Harry was fulfilling his promise to Rudopholus the ghost. Having put a little thought and a lot of ingenuity into it, he had managed to make one of the swords that had previously hung on the wall able to interact with the ghost's ethereal blade. The dead swordsman was absolutely thrilled to be able to teach Harry his craft, and Harry was rather enjoying the chance to get some exercise. Currently, they were involved in a sparring session that was unique both in its silence, since the swords

made no noise as they hit each other, and its ferocity, because the swords couldn't hurt Rudopholus and Harry just got the chills if a sword pierced his body.

The ghost danced out of the way of a wildly flailing swing. "Harry, Harry, Harry. I can tell you have never had occasion to use a blade before. You're very novice, but don't worry, you'll probably never have occasion to go into battle."

Harry was almost offended at this condescension. His well-honed reflexes helped him dodge one strike, but unfortunately moved him right into the way of another, which would have neatly bisected his head from his body had the sword been made of steel. Choking past the extremely strange feelings that the ghostly blade invoked in the region of his throat, he protested. "Hey! I'll have you know that I've killed a basilisk with a sword!"

Rudopholus looked at his student. "Really?" The word was drawn out and skeptical.

Harry grinned and lowered his sword, resting for a moment. "Yes, I did. And I was only twelve years old. I won't say I didn't have any help, but I did the actual killing." He grimaced. "Almost took me with it, blasted thing."

"Perchance, would this have been a magical sword?" The ghost held his blade a ready position, and Harry copied him.

Harry blinked. "Well, yes."

"Ahh, well, that explains it." The ghost took advantage of Harry's gasp of annoyance and lunged.

"Hey!" Harry barely managed to block the thrust, but recovered nicely, sending a feint to the right and then attempting to skewer the spirit. However nice the attempt, it didn't work. "Are you implying that I am not any good with a sword?" Harry sounded extremely offended, but the grin on his face told both the ghost and the watching audience of two that he was joking.

Rudopholus smirked and with a quick move that Harry didn't even see, sent Harry's sword flying through a wall, with the hilt, as the only solid part, sticking out from the wall like an unusual coat hook. "I haven't fenced for nearly a millennium. You'd better stick to magic." Suddenly the ghost looked worried. "I do hope you have some decent magical skills, lad. You need to be able to protect yourself, you know."

The young man who had single-handedly taken down the world's greatest dark lord, without a wand and without sustaining any lasting harm, blinked in surprise and then chuckled. "Oh, I do OK." After that massive understatement, Harry was just about ready to retrieve his sword and continue to spar, when he realized that they had company. Remus was standing in the doorway, with Sirius looking over his shoulder. His eyes narrowed in anger. "Get out." His voice was colder than ice.

The werewolf spoke up quickly, hoping to salvage something of the conversation. "Yes, sir. Do you have anything you want us to do?"

Harry glared. "I don't care what you do, just stay out of my way." Sirius swallowed hard and backed away. Remus nodded sadly and turned to follow, wondering if they had any chance at all.

Harry, furious with them for even being there and with himself for letting them get him so angry, reached and pulled the sword from the wall with a violent motion. Then, with a guttural growl, he threw it down, where the hilt made a clattering sound against the stone floor. Rudopholus watched as Harry paced in a tight circle, fuming. "Dare I ask who that was?"

Harry sighed. "They used to be two of the people that I trusted most. They were best friends with my father, and one of them was my godfather."

"Oh? That doesn't sound like the type of mortal enemies they are made out of."

"No, you wouldn't think so. But they..." Harry found himself at a loss for words. "They betrayed me." Such a small sentence, for such a huge problem.

"Ahh. And the fact that you had trusted them made it worse."

"Yes." Harry kicked at the floor, knowing that he was acting like a spoiled child right then, but not particularly caring. He felt he'd earned the right to throw a temper tantrum or two. Or ten or twenty.

"And what they did, it affected you badly?" The ghost sounded curious, but sympathetic.

Harry thought about the nights spent screaming at the dementors to leave him alone, the days spent praying to die, and the overriding horror of being an unwilling witness to Voldemort's machinations and increasingly bloody torture sessions. "Yes." The word was an understatement, because there was no way that he could explain just how badly the loss their trust had hurt him. Azkaban he had survived, through what he considered a combination of luck and fate, but the loss of his friends and family had hurt more than any crucio curse, more than any painful memory the dementors could drag up.

More than anything he'd ever been through before or since.

The ghost shrugged. "Well, kill them then. If not for revenge, then so they can't do it again." Harry's eyebrows shot up, somewhat shocked at the suggestion. "I wouldn't suggest using a sword, though. There's two of them, and you'd be hard pressed to take even one of them."

Harry sputtered, and then realized that the ghost was only working from his range of knowledge, that of the wizarding world's dark ages, which, while written about as a time of great deeds and powerful romances, had been a violent and bloody time. "Well, I don't really want to do that..."

"No, definitely use magic. Much safer for you." The ghost nodded knowingly, like he advised potential murderers a couple of times a week.

"I mean, I don't want them dead. They were my father's friends." The two eavesdropping marauders couldn't hold back a huge, if silent, sigh of relief at this. "What I want is to never see them again." That sigh was quickly followed by an equally large wince.

Rudopholus looked confused. "Why are they here, then? Throw them out! They look healthy enough, they won't starve before they hit a village somewhere."

Harry was mightily tempted, but knew that it probably wouldn't work. He didn't know the exact details of the spell linking him to the other two, but his gut told him that there was some part of it that made the wrongdoer have to be near the wronged, to use Dumbledore's terminology. Harry grinned to himself as he pictured the headmaster. He had certainly used up one of his temper tantrums that day. But they were just so infuriating. All of them! Thinking that they could just prance back into his life and make it all better. Whether he wanted it fixed or not. Filled with anger again, he punched the stone wall. Hard.

Which, as anyone with common sense can tell you, isn't a very intelligent thing to do. "Ow!" Swearing under his breath and shaking his throbbing hand, Harry decided he'd better calm down before he did more than just bruise his hand. Nodding goodbye to an understanding, if slightly confused, ghost, Harry headed out of the room.

And then nearly tripped over Remus and Sirius, who had parked themselves a few feet from the door to eavesdrop. They obviously hadn't heard him coming. Harry stopped dead in the middle of the corridor and clamped his eyes shut, hand itching for the smooth feel of his wand. "You two had better not be anywhere on this whole bloody floor by the time I open my eyes, or I SWEAR I'll shut both of you up in the dungeons so I can have some peace."

The only thing that he heard after that was hurried footsteps and the muffled voice of Sirius exclaiming, "I told you he just hadn't thought of it yet!"

"Just move, Padfoot. I really don't think that he's joking."



Harry opened his eyes and smirked at the now deserted corridor. He wasn't really sure why he hadn't just cursed them, but then again, confusion was something that he was becoming accustomed to. Instead of letting it bother him, he shrugged it off. He could always curse them later, if he felt like it. The problem with that rather satisfying mental image was that he got the distinct feeling that out of the three of them, the other two would feel better after he cursed them than he would. Like punishment would erase what had been done or something. No, the best thing both for his sanity and the continuance of their well-deserved guilt was to ignore them. Now, if he could just get them to stay away from him so that his resolve wouldn't be tested. Somehow, he didn't think that was going to be quite as easy as getting them to leave the floor had been.

He sighed and headed towards the owl room to see if he couldn't dig up some information on the spell that had been used. Considering all of the trouble he'd been put to so far, not to mention his horrible luck, he'd probably end up having to sneak into Hogwarts and look for the spell book himself. Typical.

Grumbling and muttering to himself as he stalked forward, Harry wistfully remembered a time only a few days before when all he had been worried about was being bored in his new home.

Shaking his head, he told himself that he should have known better.

He was Harry Potter, after all.

COMING SOON: An incident with an elf, a report from Snape, and a letter from old friends.

## CHAPTER 16

### Missives

Harry stormed into the dining hall, nearly mowing over a house elf that he didn't recognize in the process. Whoever it was squeaked in horror as Harry tried to regain his balance without falling or stepping on anything. Babbling an apology, the tiny elf, clothed in what seemed to be a corner of a ragged red tablecloth, began kicking his bare feet against the wall as punishment. Harry blinked. "Hey, stop it!"

The new elf stopped immediately. "So sorry, Master Wizard Harry Potter, Rully so sorry. Punish Rully, Master Wizard Harry Potter!" Harry got the feeling that the elf was about five seconds away from falling at his feet.

Harry blinked again, feeling a good portion of his anger drain away. This must be one of the new recruits that Dobby had informed him that he would be finding. "No, I ran into you, it wasn't your fault." The elf looked so shocked at this that he nearly fell over. "Did you say your name was Rully?"

The elf hurriedly nodded. "Yes, Rully did say that, Master Wizard Harry Potter."

"Oh." Harry ran a hand through his hair. "Rully, you don't ever have to punish yourself here, OK?"

Rully's eyes widened to the point where Harry feared that they might pop out of their sockets. But before the house elf could say a word in response to what he considered his new master's absolutely ridiculous and insane statement, another elf arrived on the scene.

Dobby popped into view and seemed to figure out the situation almost immediately. "Harry sir, Rully not know. Rully learn, Dobby tell." Dobby shot the other elf a look that clearly promised a full explanation.

Harry nodded. "Thanks, Dobby. I see that we have some new elves. How many?"

Rully seemed perfectly content to let Dobby do all the talking with this new, and very strange master. Dobby puffed out his chest slightly as he answered. "Dobby find five house elves for Harry sir now. Six more come soon. Harry sir need only them for castle run good."

"Good job, Dobby." Dobby looked proud at this statement.

"Harry sir?" At Harry's nod to go on, Dobby continued. "Other wizards, they master, too?"

Harry frowned angrily at this remark. Rully shrank back against the wall, and even Dobby looked a little scared. Harry hurried to clarify. "I'm not angry at you, don't worry. No, they are not in charge of you. Get them what they need, but if they ask you for anything that isn't necessary, check with me first. Also, I'll be wanting my meals in my room until I figure out a way to get rid of them."

Dobby blinked at this, but did not comment. "Yes sir, Harry sir."

"Thanks, and it was nice meeting you, Rully." Harry headed toward the owl room once again.

Rully's voice sounded confused but very honored at this recognition. "Yes, sir, Master Wizard Harry Potter, sir."

Harry spoke over his shoulder. "Call me Harry, Rully."

Rully nearly passed out. Turning to Dobby with a look of absolute horror on his small face, he exclaimed. "Rully can't do THAT!"

Dobby shook his head condescendingly. "Harry sir not normal. Not like long name. Call Harry sir like Dobby. Or Master Harry. Short name better." Rully gulped and nodded, and Harry, who had been eavesdropping as he walked away, grinned. He'd struck yet another blow in the fight for normalcy Harry Potter style.

But seeing the house elves and the way that they treated the person they considered their owner made him think of S.P.E.W. Which made him think of Hermione. Which made him think of Ron and Hermione together with him, like they had been for four short years. Which made him think of the six years that they hadn't been friends. When they'd been perfectly content to think of him as a murderer.

Which promptly put him in a foul mood again.

Resuming his grumbling, he opened the door to the owl room, took one look inside and then slammed the door in the face of the horde of owls that headed his way. He leaned his head against the wood door in absolute disgust. This day was getting progressively worse. What next, boggarts in the kitchen? Albus Dumbledore showing up for tea? He really just wanted to go back to bed. However, he had to deal with the fact that so far, none of the problems he'd encountered so far were of the type that would be magically, or any other way, made better if he tried getting out of the other side of the bed.

So, it was with a huge sigh that Harry opened the door, stuck his wand around the edge and sent a shield to cover the area around the door. Then, safe from over enthusiastic, dive-bombing owls, he stepped into the room. After informing the owls of what order he wanted them to come to him, he started the process of gathering his mail. He was amazed by the number of envelopes, but realized that Dumbledore had probably spread the word that he was alive, not to mention the fact that four days worth of just fan mail was a sizable stack. A stack that he immediately sent into the fire unopened.

The one envelope that really caught his attention was a large, rather bulky package carried by a large, mean looking black owl. Checking the package, he realized that it was from Snape. Ignoring the rest of the letters, he told the owls that there would be no replies, and made a mental note to figure out a way to order an owl or two for personal use soon. Abstractly, he wondered what had happened to Hedwig, while slitting open the letter attached to the package.

Potter

After overhearing most of the rather interesting discussion that you partook of in the headmaster's office the other day, I imagine that you would be interested in knowing exactly what spell that mangy mutt and the flea-bitten wolf cast on you. Since they were so kind as to leave the book out and opened to the page that they got the information from, it really wasn't all that difficult of a task. I have enclosed the book itself, which, since it is owned by Hogwarts, probably should be returned at some point. However, no one saw me take it, so do what you like.

May I complement you on a difficult task accomplished and words well chosen. After your little tantrum, Dumbledore was depressed for an entire day, which, incidentally, is nearly the amount of time that he moped after your incarceration. However, since I have reason to believe that running out of those horrid muggle sweets he likes so much will depress him for several hours, I'll let you draw your own conclusions as to his sincerity.

Notify me if you need any additional information. I shall continue with the current regimen if I do not hear from you.

Severus Snape

Harry smiled grimly. The letter was so very... Snape. Pulling the wrapping off of the book, he paged through it briefly and then banished it up to his room, where he would have the time to read it with the attention it deserved. His mood lightened somewhat, maybe it wouldn't be so difficult to break the bond. At least he had somewhere to start.

Glancing at the pile of letters on the table, he noticed one with Please read, Harry! written along side his name. He picked it up, recognizing the distinctive handwriting immediately. He should have, he'd copied her notes enough times to recognize the unique curlicue that Hermione always added to the tail of her e's.

Holding the letter in his hand, he pondered the difficult issue of opening it. He still couldn't quite comprehend how the two people that he had undeniably trusted the most could have thought that he was guilty of murder. Harry wasn't bragging or trying to be proud when he

admitted to himself that he could have seen Hermione, or Ron for that matter, actually use the killing curse on someone, and he still would have been convinced that they were under Imperious or some dangerous potion. He just couldn't fathom how they could have believed the huge, ugly lie Voldemort had fed them. That part of him wanted to walk over, and throw this letter in with the still smoldering fan mail.

But another part, smaller, but just as opinionated, wanted to know what she had to say for herself. And, eventually, it was this part that won out, to the other side of his mind's utter disgust. The look of confusion and conflicting emotions on his face as he opened the letter would probably have been very interesting, had there been anyone else there to see it.

Dear Harry,

I really hope that you are reading this. If you've gotten this far, please don't stop. I know it isn't enough, but I am truly sorry for ever believing that you... you know. I wish I could come up with a good excuse, or maybe an explanation, but no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to come up with anything that doesn't make me want to just die of how could I be so stupid!

That goes the same for me, Harry. I swear, I've done a lot of very stupid things, some of which you were there for, but I've never done anything quite as dumb as doing exactly what Voldemort wanted me to do. I don't know how to apologize to you. I know that I can't, really.

Anyway, Harry, I know that you won't be able to forgive us for a good long while, and maybe never, but please know that we are thinking about you. Albus told us that you had been to Hogwarts, and the basics of what transpired. We were both very glad to hear that you are alive and well.

Umm, I know you're probably pretty angry with Sirius and Remus too, but please don't kill them, I really think that you might regret it later.

Oh, that was profound.

He probably won't read it anyway. I wouldn't, if things were switched, but then, we'd probably be dead already if I was him, so maybe this isn't the best...

(There was scribble on the parchment that gave the impression that someone had grabbed the quill out of his hand.)

ANYWAY, we'll just close this letter with another apology, and please, Harry, if there is anyway that we can ever make this up to you, please... we miss you.

Yeah.

Sincerely, and with as many apologies as we can possibly make,

Hermione,

and Ron

Harry stared at the letter, not sure exactly how to react. He agreed with nearly everything that they had said, from the fact that they were stupid to the fact that he'd probably never be able to forgive them for their stupidity. However, just seeing the familiar writing, and noticing the fact that they still bickered like children made his heart twinge for what might have been. He missed them. He missed them the way that they had been in Hogwarts, when they were all together and any problem could be figured out and conquered, regardless of who else had tried and failed. He missed laughing with them. He missed watching them fight off both their annoyance with each other and sexual tension at the same time. He missed exchanging sarcastic looks with Ron when Hermione waxed a little too intelligent for the common person, and rolling his eyes with Hermione when Ron was being a prat. Most of all, he missed believing that they would always be there for him, no matter what happened.

He missed them, and he hated the thought of them just as much.

"Bloody hell, can I get any more confused?" Harry muttered to himself as he flapped the letter in the air, unsure about what to do with it.

Finally, he just returned it to the envelope and stuck it back in the stack. He just couldn't deal with it, or them, yet.

Harry resolved to try and pretend that he'd never read the letter. He snorted. Like that would work. And while he was at it, he'd just act like he was the only occupant of the castle. Throwing up his hands in frustration at the multitude of angry and conflicting thoughts that were running rampant in his mind, he decided to hide in his room. So much for being brave and facing his problems head on. Some Gryffindor he was today. At least it would be quiet there, and no one would disturb him.

He could always hope, anyway.

Plus, he could take a look at that spell book. Now, all he had to do was get back to his room on the second floor without running into anymore petrified house elves or unwanted slaves. Harry was getting a migraine already.

COMING SOON: The spell, a few interesting quirks thereof, and unavoidable contact.

There's Ron and Hermione for those of you who have been wondering. Sorry, they haven't had as much story time, but way back when, when this was still a little plot fly buzzing incessantly in my head (and people wonder why I'm strange... heh) I had to decide who would be in the castle with Harry. Padfoot and Moony won, mostly because this was right after OOTP and I was feeling deprived. As for having them all together, it just didn't seem realistic that the entire group of HP characters would all be hanging around groveling for forgiveness. Even Harry's not quite that unlucky. So our unfortunate Mr. Potter will have to deal with them, but perhaps luckily for them, it may be a while.

Sorry this was a little later than usual, a close friend of mine got married yesterday, and I was helping out in that. I have to admit that I totally forgot that I was going to stick this up before I left. -krtshadow



## CHAPTER 17

### Orders

Nearly an hour later, Harry wasn't any closer to the sanctuary of his room. He'd been sidetracked by Dobby, who needed permission to owl order some supplies, and then, after having a brilliant idea, Harry had made Rully the new permanent house-elf-in-charge-of-mail. Rully was thrilled to be of use, and to be honest, the idea of staying away from owls and letters in general made Harry rather happy as well. This way, he would get the important mail delivered to him right away, and the newspaper in the morning, the way that it should be. Harry found that he was craving some kind of normalcy. It didn't necessarily have to be normal normalcy, like what the Dursleys desired, but it did need to calm down a little. His life had been so messed up, twisted, and strange for so long, well, frankly, as long as he could remember, that he really just wanted to relax and have a chance to be Harry for a while.

Wandering back upstairs, he managed to make it to his room without any unwanted encounters. Well, technically, he'd seen Sirius moping in the hall near the library, but with the help of a detour Harry had managed to avoid his godfather. The fact that it had taken him nearly fifteen minutes longer and caused him to go up and down a grand total of three extra staircases didn't really bother Harry.

Settling in to an armchair, Harry summoned the spell book, which, interestingly enough, was entitled, *Repair Next-To-Anything With A Bond*, by Titus T. Gether. The book was old and dusty, and Harry opened carefully, not really wanting it to fall apart in his hands. It was also very thick, so Harry was relieved to see that there was a marker in the book near the back. Paging there, he read:

The Bond of Supreme Apologies. Harry stifled a snort, finding the name rather humorous.

Classification: Extremely Dangerous

This bond, rumored to have been originally used by the ancient Mesopotamian mages of the Third Era, allows a bond to be created

between the caster, someone who has irrevocably harmed or hurt another being, and the being harmed. Usually used in cases where there was some grievous mistake or misunderstanding, and where there would be no legal recourse for the wounded party. It was the Muggle custom of the times to condemn to slavery criminals that were not guilty of major crimes, (i.e. murder, treason, assault with intent to kill), and this bonding spell just adapted that custom to the magical world.

However, this variant of the bonding spell is perhaps the most powerful of its kind. It can only be invoked if the caster is truly willing to place his (or her) life in the hands of the other. It is considered a very risky undertaking, because, if this deep of a bond is necessary, it usually means that the crime committed was of a very serious nature. In this case the bond might be severed by the death of the caster, thus inflicted as revenge for the wrong committed. Before you try this bond, it is good to get an idea of what the potential master would be likely to do in this situation. (The author of this book is not responsible for any damage that occurs due to the successful completion of this bond. It is dangerous. You have been warned.)

Far more in depth than just an oath of obedience (see pages 139-152, 219), this bond ties both parties together through magic, forcing the caster to obey direct orders or suffer pain that gets greater as more infractions occur. Once again, this bond is dangerous for the caster because it would be relatively easy for the owner to give an order against breathing or some such necessary function as a way to get revenge on the caster. Another aspect is the distance needed. This tends to vary by the individual bond, and seems to be linked to the amount of guilt felt by the caster. Normally, the caster is magically bound to be near the owner, although the distance can range up to mile.

Another reason that this bond is considered highly dangerous is that at the time of this printing the ramifications of this spell can relegate the human caster to the approximate legal status of a slave. Although in most incidents life itself is protected, there have been cases where the owner has killed the caster in punishment either for the original wrong or another, and been cleared of all charges or never brought to

trial at all. Depending on the area and the exact laws in place, it can be looked upon as nothing more than killing a disobedient house elf.

The process of this bonding ritual is most complicated to attempt, and should only be undertaken by the patient and talented. The first element of the...

"Ugh." Harry quickly paged through the next four pages. He didn't need to know how to do it; he needed to know how to break it. Although he was very interested to find out that Black and Lupin had to obey his direct orders. He tried to remember if he'd given any that would still be in effect, but couldn't think of any right of the top of his head.

The not breathing one was tempting, but cruel. Harry sighed. Life would be a whole lot easier if he just went dark and killed off all the annoying people. Not that he ever would, but days like this tempted him beyond words.

Harry leaned back and stared out the window of the castle, looking out from the second story height into the grounds beyond. The summer sun beat down on the rather wild looking grounds and Harry smiled sardonically. It was fitting, he thought. This castle just about as abandoned as he felt right now.

Life had been a lot simpler when he was in Azkaban. Horrible, but a whole lot simpler. Survive, that had been the basic motto there. Out here, survival wasn't as much of an issue, but confusion and anger seemed to have taken over his brain. Harry forced himself to think rationally about his former friends. Dumbledore, Sirius, Hermione, Ron, Remus and a lot of others. It would be a whole lot easier to sort out his feelings if he didn't know that they were sorry for what had happened. But he knew. Yes, he knew. He'd seen the look of anguish on Sirius' face when Harry had been staring blankly at walls, and the look of pained acceptance in Dumbledore's eyes when Harry had shouted a few hard truths his direction. And although he hadn't seen much of Ron and Hermione, especially not since the night of the attack at the Weasleys, Harry could well imagine how torn up they were over the matter.

He understood, in one way. He knew that the case brought against him had seemed solid. He'd been witness to a number of Voldemort's gloating rants on his own genius in the framing of his greatest enemy. The evidence had been well planted, the plan unnoticed by spies, the details worked out to the smallest degree. No one had questioned him under Veritaserum, or given him a chance to defend himself, but frankly, the Ministry of Magic wasn't known for its respect for human rights. No, he was annoyed by the fact that he hadn't gotten a trial, but not all that surprised. What hurt deep down was that no one had come to see him. Not Dumbledore, not Remus, the Weasleys, no one. Sirius couldn't exactly have come himself, since he had been on the run at the time, but he certainly could have sent a message through Dumbledore or someone else that could have safely gone to the Ministry.

They had accepted the evidence, damning as it may have been, over his word. Worse, they hadn't even been willing to listen to his word. That's what he couldn't forget.

Azkaban had nearly killed him. He was pretty sure he'd been mostly, if not totally, insane by about two years in. Yeah, it hadn't ended up all that bad, but that certainly wasn't the doing of anyone on the outside. Harry shook his head. If he hadn't happened to be having a vision right at that one moment, he'd probably still would be the witless idiot he'd pretended to be at the Weasleys. He still wasn't quite decided about if that whole matter had been fate or pure dumb luck. Either way, he wasn't going to complain seeing as he was alive, sane, and out of Azkaban.

He'd always been something a loner, albeit more by necessity than nature, but he felt more alone right now that he'd felt since he'd first heard the iron doors of Azkaban clang shut behind him. He was just as caged in by the actions of others around him as he had been by the stone walls of the island prison. It was a different type of cell, but just as lonely.

With a sigh that seemed to start somewhere around his knees, Harry returned to the book. He wasn't sure what exactly he was going to do about the others, but right now he just needed to focus on that stupid bond. It had to be breakable, right? If it had been used as a

punishment, then there had to be a way to commute the sentence. "Ah, here it is." Harry muttered as he ran a finger down the page.

And then he moaned. As he read the passage aloud, his voice grew higher and higher with disbelief. "If this bond is falsely cast (i.e. the crime committed was not severe enough or not committed at all) the bond will not take and no connection will be formed. However, once the bond is in place, the only way to dispel it is for the owner to extend forgiveness of the deed done to deserve the bond." Harry stood to his feet, throwing the book against the wall. "BLOODY HELL!"

Swearing like a sailor, he stalked around the room for a while, demolishing the neatness of his room as he went. It was shortly after the night stand got tipped over, landing with a bang on its side, that the door flew open and two of the more prominent addressees Harry's invective dashed into the room, wands drawn. Both appeared worried and had obviously heard the noise and had come to make sure that Harry was all right.

Harry was certainly all right in a physical sense, but later, in hindsight, of course, Remus and Sirius mutually decided that barging in right at that moment ranked right up there in the top ten stupidest things they'd ever done. It still ranked behind signing their names on the wall the time they'd 'redecorated' the Great Hall in 5th year, but was definitely ahead of a lot of other things.

Harry, a gleam in his eye that did very little for the state of their peace of mind, slowly turned from where he was standing by the window. Sirius was faintly reminded of James the time Sirius announced to the world, the Gryffindor common room anyway, that Potter was in love with Evans. The resulting laughter of one Lily Evans had brought on a temper tantrum that Sirius still remembered with horror, and no one had ever teased James about Lily in public since. Sirius stifled a shudder. If Harry had even half the temper James had had...

Unfortunately for both Marauders, Harry had inherited not half, but all of his father's temper, and a good portion of his mother's ability to erupt into fury as well. Add this to a prior, very serious grudge, and the result was huge. Wisely, they both began to back out of the door,

but Harry was completely furious, and the opportunity to relieve a little tension was entirely too tempting. With a snarl that even Remus would have been hard pressed to imitate, Harry growled. "Stop."

Remus managed to do so immediately, but Sirius, in the middle of a step, moved back farther, and was immediately hit with a pain in the head, a twisting pull of magic activated by his disobedience of a direct order. He grunted in pain and stopped, panting slightly from the pain. Rubbing his head, he made the rather obvious statement. "Ow."

Remus shot a quick, slightly worried glance at him, but hurriedly returned his eyes to the slowly advancing Harry. A Harry who literally looked like the cold-blooded murderer the wizarding world had once thought that he was. Remus swallowed. This looked like it was going to hurt.

Harry was beyond caring about his previous decision that ignoring the two would be the best punishment for them. He had had an absolutely horrible day, and on top of everything else, had just discovered that there was no way to get rid of his two unwanted slaves without forgiving them, which, on top of being highly unlikely, wasn't really likely to get rid of them at all. Harry shot a glare at the still wincing Sirius. "Oh, did that hurt? I'm so sorry." He sounded anything but.

Sirius looked up into the blazing eyes of his godson and audibly gulped, the fading pain in his head forgotten. James began to seem like something of a lightweight in comparison, and Sirius cringed as he unknowingly echoed his friend's thoughts. This looked like it was going to hurt. Sirius sincerely wished that Harry would just punch him, like James would have done, but knew that he probably wouldn't. Harry seemed to prefer words to blows. Sirius knew why. They hurt more.

Harry began speaking very quietly, his voice laced with anger and tension. "Imagine what I just discovered. This blasted bond you've shoved on me can't be broken. You absolute gits! Did you really think that I wanted you around? After what you did to me? You never even asked to hear my side of things! Please enlighten me as to why I would ever want to see your faces again!" Sirius opened his mouth to

reply, but Harry cut him off. "That was rhetorical. Shut up." He turned away in disgust, pacing the room angrily. Then whirling, he pinned both men with a glare that quite possibly could have melted wrought iron. "I also find that you have to obey my direct commands. Fascinating, really. You picked quite the spell to use. Congratulations, you will now probably be spending the rest of your lives in this castle."

Remus spoke quietly. "The bond can be broken, I believe."

Harry laughed coldly. "Yes, if I forgive you. Forgive you for killing what little was left of my childhood. I think that I could have stood Azkaban, if I'd had the thought that someone somewhere didn't think that I was a murderer." His eyes grew sad, and the look of betrayal that flashed in them for just a second was enough to hit both men with a crushing wave of guilt. Anger returned to Harry's eyes as he spoke again. "I wouldn't be holding your breath expecting me to be able to forgive that."

Remus winced. That was putting it rather bluntly. He glanced at his friend, noticing the slumped shoulders, knowing that if Harry's words were hurting Remus, they were shredding the heart of the person standing beside him. Sirius still partially blamed himself for James' death, and now James' son hated them. The fact that the hatred was mostly deserved didn't make either of the men feel any better.

Harry was done ranting, done glaring, and was perfectly ready to just be done with them entirely for a while. Forever was probably too much to hope for. Looking at the two men, he snapped. "Get out. Don't talk to me, and don't come near me. I don't want to even know that I have the misfortune of sharing a castle with you. Is this perfectly clear?"

White faced, both men nodded and turned to leave. Harry watched them go, feeling angry, confused, and exhausted. With a huge sigh, he fell back onto his bed and lay, staring up at the stone ceiling. He had entirely too many things on his mind tonight.

Yes, life had been simpler in Azkaban. Not that he wanted to go back or anything, but life had been much simpler.

COMING SOON: Sirius, Remus, and a full moon.

OK, was it just me or was that last bit a little depressing? Poor Sirius. I'm beginning to feel a little guilty for putting him through this. Hey, at least he's still around, huh? Well, see you next week... if school doesn't eat me first. Reviews are anxiously read and reviewers are thought of with kind thoughts.

Also, about the orders that Harry has given, there was one prior that he didn't remember right then. In Dumbledore's office, he gave a direct order for them not to call him Harry. Any other orders he's given between then and now were either not direct enough to still be in effect, or the order has already been fulfilled. Just an FYI. – krtshadow



## CHAPTER 18

### Howl

Two weeks passed without any meaningful contact between Harry and Remus or Sirius. About once a day he would catch a glimpse of one or the other of them, but adhering to their orders, as soon as they spotted him, they turned around and went the other way. Harry used the time to catch up on the wizarding world in general, ordering and reading past issues of the Daily Prophet and several books based on the years he'd spent in Azkaban. Several were quite amusing, to say the least.

Harry finally just decided that the Ministry of Magic as a whole was utterly inept. Oh there were a few good people working in it, and the aurors were well trained, but most of the leadership was either stupid or corrupt. Harry really couldn't understand why the magical population stood for it. Nearly every announcement that Fudge had made was proven wrong eventually. Harry shook his head in disbelief. That idiot was still Minister, which was what really amazed him. Yes, there was a ten-year term of office for the Minister of Magic, but surely they could have made an exception for that prize idiot. Speaking of which, it was an election year, and Fudge, taking full advantage of the fact that the threat of Voldemort was over, was actually ahead in the polls. Harry snorted grimly. Like he'd had anything to do with it. If he remembered right, Harry himself had been the one that did all of the work in that quarter.

Harry looked up as a pop announced the arrival of a house elf. It was Rully, with a letter and a package in hand. Setting down his newspaper beside his empty tea dishes, Harry smiled at the small elf, who blinked happily in response. It was taking a while, but Harry was getting Rully to relax a little. "Hello, Rully."

"Master Harry, Rully has package. Master Harry want it now?" At Harry's nod, the house elf handed over the package, took the dishes and left.

Harry recognized the distinctive script on the letter, by now he was quite familiar with Snape's handwriting. Looking at the package with

curiosity, he slit open the letter. Snape's letters were always informative, but the potions master hadn't sent any packages since he'd sent the book on bonds a little over two weeks ago. Harry glared angrily at the book that was sitting on the desk in the corner. A few pages were bent and the cover dented, due to Harry's temper tantrum several weeks before. Harry's further research into the bond and other similar types of spells gave him little hope. There was a slight chance that the bond would just wear off over time, but it didn't seem very likely. Not any time in the near future anyway. Very few of the bonds that were historically recorded were of the exact type that Harry was now enmeshed in, and those few that were usually had been broken by forgiveness or death within a few years. That didn't leave a lot of room for Harry to speculate on how long this one would remain strong.

Snape's letter was characteristically short and to the point.

Potter

I rather doubt that you have had much use for calendars recently. Perhaps you are even unaware that tonight is a full moon. I have enclosed a dose of wolfsbane potion in case you have issues with vicious werewolves running around whatever remote place you have hidden yourself at. Which, by the way, is something that is greatly annoying both Dumbledore and the Ministry. Unless you want to be declared missing or dead, you might want to put in an appearance one of these days, as Fudge believes that Dumbledore is making up the meeting that he had with you in an effort to keep the ministry from finding out that you are dead. Why Fudge cares one way or another, I do not know.

Watch yourself tonight. You would make an exceptionally vicious lycanthrope.

Snape

Harry blinked. Had Snape actually been worried about him? No, it couldn't be. He sighed. He hated to admit it to himself, but he had totally forgotten about the full moon. And it was an issue. Snape was right, Harry really didn't need being made into a werewolf added onto

his other problems. Not to mention, that would make Lupin really unbearable to be around, if yet another load of guilt was added to his shoulders.

Turning into a large, furry, insane animal every month was not something that appealed to Harry. No, thanks. Harry opened the package and withdrew a large vial of a dark liquid. Carefully, he uncorked it to have a whiff and then immediately wished he hadn't. "Eeuuch." Stuffing the cork back in, he set it down on the table and stared at it.

He'd managed to avoid thinking about those two idiots, as he'd been recently thinking of them as, since he'd given them the order to stay away from him. Mostly, anyway. He couldn't deny that every once in a while, while watching Sirius' back as the older man hurried in the opposite direction, Harry entertained thoughts about what could have been. What might have happened if he'd let them kill Peter, or if that night hadn't been a full moon, or if the people he loved had only trusted him a little more and the evidence a little less. But thoughts of this nature only made Harry feel bitter. Somehow, the fates had decided that Harry Potter wasn't to have a family. He seemed to have been put on the earth for the sole purpose of defeating Voldemort and saving the world.

However, now that that particular task was complete, Harry really wasn't sure what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. He wasn't even twenty-one yet. But he didn't want to go out into the wizarding world. The hero worship would be more than anyone could stomach, much less Harry, with his extremely low tolerance for being stared at. Harry could just imagine trying to get a job somewhere and having the interviewer want his autograph first. He briefly considered the idea of changing his appearance and name, but then tossed that idea. He was Harry Potter and he was proud of the name that his parents had given him. They had loved him before he was famous, and he would keep the name that they'd given him and the looks that he'd inherited from them as a tribute to them.

Harry shook himself out of his muse and eyed the potion warily. Finally coming to a decision, he called out. "Dobby?"

A pop heralded the arrival of the house elf. "Harry sir called for Dobby?"

Harry was thinking as he spoke. "Yes, well, Dobby, I need a favor."

"Dobby do anything to help."

"Is there a way that you can tell me what the other two wizards are up too without them knowing that you are checking on them?"

Dobby thought for a moment. "Dobby knows what they do sometimes, they work in library. Or stay in room and talk. Harry sir want to know about right now?" At Harry's nod, Dobby continued. "Dobby go check on other wizards. Dobby back soon. Other wizards never see Dobby." With this he gave Harry a decidedly mischievous look and disappeared. Harry grinned and returned to the day's paper. He could count on Dobby.

Sure enough, about ten minutes later, Dobby returned. Harry looked up as the elf made his report. "Other wizards are arguing in dungeons."

"The dungeons?" Harry blinked.

Dobby moved in what could only be called a shrug, although on a house elf, it looked rather strange. "They fixing cell door and arguing. Very loud wizards." Dobby huffed slightly, as if the sound had offended his rather large ears.

Light dawned in Harry's mind. "Oh, they must be trying to make a place for Pr... Lupin to transform." He grinned slightly. He couldn't help but relish the thought that they were concerned about the upcoming night when he knew that there was nothing for them to be worried about. Revenge comes in the smallest of things sometimes. Allowing himself a slight chuckle at this thought, Harry nodded thanks to Dobby and returned to his stack of old newspapers.

A while later, Harry glanced out of his window. The sun was setting. Nearly two hours had passed. He'd been sitting reading for longer than he'd thought. The vial of potion still sat in front of him. Harry

sighed, he couldn't put it off any longer. Lupin would need the potion soon. But he'd be hanged if he was going to deliver the potion himself. "Dobby?"

Once again the house elf came as summoned. "Harry sir?"

"Sorry to keep bothering you, Dobby."

Dobby sent Harry a look that fully implied that the man was somewhat slow in the head. "Dobby wants to help Harry sir. Not bothering Dobby at all."

"Yes, well, could you take this potion down to the other wizards for me?" Harry handed it over.

Dobby nodded and carefully took the potion into his long fingered hands, holding it carefully. "Dobby do that. If other wizards ask what it is, what should Dobby say?"

"Just give it to them and if they ask tell them I gave it to you to give to them. That's all they need to know." Harry watched as Dobby disappeared and then returned to his paper with a sigh, rather wishing he could be there as Dobby handed over the potion.

Meanwhile, several floors down, Remus and Sirius were still arguing. They had changed topics several times, but the intensity of the conversation hadn't dimmed for hours. It wasn't all that unusual, actually. The day before the full moon always made Remus' mood a mix between stubborn, stressed and crabby. Add to that rather frightening mixture Sirius' natural hardheadedness and the result was usually barely controlled chaos of some sort.

They were sitting in the dungeons, backs against the stone wall, staring out the barred window where night was just beginning to overshadow the sky. Sirius was just in the process of repeating something that, from the tone of his voice, was not being repeated for the first time. "No! You do not have to tell Harry. We are not supposed to talk to Harry, as you are so fond of always reminding me. You will be fine here. Because I fixed the door. And I'll be here. You won't get out, I won't let you."

"Padfoot, we've been over this, I fixed that door, not you." Remus looked unsure. "I just think that he should be warned. If I got out..."

"You won't!"

"...then I could really hurt him..."

"You WON'T!"

"...or even kill him..."

"YOU WON'T!"

Remus seemed to not even hear Sirius' increasingly loud interruptions. "...so I really think that I should warn him, it will only take a second, and then I can get out of there."

"Look, Moony, you haven't yet had the pleasure of experiencing the headache you get when we disobey. Do yourself a favor and put it off as long as possible. It hurts." Sirius winced slightly. The pain was of the memorable sort. He'd disobey if he had to, but not unless it was pretty darn important.

Remus glared. "Oh, so I should put Harry in danger because I don't want to get a headache?"

"That's not what I said!" Sirius was beginning to get annoyed for about the ninth time that day.

"That is too what you said!"

"NO! I said that Harry isn't in danger at all! So warning him about something that can't hurt him, but that will hurt you is just plain stupid!" Sirius concluded this burst of logic with a grin, sure that his friend wouldn't be able to argue with this.

No such luck. "So now I'm stupid for not wanting Harry to get hurt?"

"I'm going to kill you." Sirius' sigh was far from long-suffering.

The rising werewolf part of Remus took this threat literally and Remus snarled angrily. "Try it and I'll rip your throat out!"

Sirius, unfortunately, didn't seem to be cowed by this. "Oh, don't get your tail in a twist. I was being sarcastic."

The argument might then have evolved into physical violence, something else that wasn't all that unusual right before a transformation, but they were interrupted by the pop of an arriving house elf. Dobby, to be exact. Remus, who in his current mood didn't like people just popping in, turned and growled at the elf, who squeaked and retreated slightly. Sirius quickly stepped in between the werewolf and the house elf and looked curiously at Dobby. "Hello, Dobby, can we help you? Now isn't really a good time, but..." He was very curious as to why the elf was here, since neither of the men had seen very much of the house elves, and even then, only when absolutely necessary. Dobby, more than slightly unnerved by Remus, quickly handed over the vial to Sirius, who took it with a blank look on his face. "What is it?"

Dobby answered quickly, obviously quite ready to get out of the dungeons. He kept both eyes firmly fixed on the muttering werewolf, who was peering around Sirius at the small elf with a look that could almost be called hungry. "Harry sir say to deliver. That's all Dobby do." Then, the small elf disappeared.

Sirius looked at the vial and then uncorked it and took a big whiff. "Auggh!"

Remus froze, his sensitive nose cataloguing the offensive scent immediately. "Sirius, that's..."

Sirius looked nauseated. "...wolfbane potion. Yes, I know, and am I ever glad that you are drinking it and not me. Merlin, that stuff stinks." He hurriedly handed it off to the other man.

Remus seemed to be in a state of shock. "But why?"

Sirius ignored that question as something else occurred to him. "Ha! This proves it! Harry already knew! So it would have been utterly useless to tell him! I win!"

Remus shot him a glare that promised much pain at a later date, but didn't argue the point. "But why send me the potion? I doubt he really cares if I keep my mind or not." Both men shared a wince. Their last interaction with Harry had given them very little doubt about what Harry thought of them. They had gambled and lost, and they knew it. But for now there wasn't anything they could do about it.

Sirius sighed. "I'd love to think that he was trying to spare you the dementia because he was worried about you, but I imagine that it has more to do with the fact that if he has to have a werewolf running around his castle, he'd just as soon it was a sane werewolf and not a homicidal maniacal killer werewolf."

Remus shrugged. "You're probably right, but I'm not going to complain." Grimacing, he set the vial to his lips.

Sirius winced as the werewolf lowered the vial. He had never tasted the wolfsbane potion, as it was deadly to a non-werewolf, but he could imagine from the smell and the look on Remus' face that it tasted absolutely horrible. Then another thought occurred to him. "Umm, Remus, any ideas on where Harry got the potion? I can't hardly believe that he made it himself."

Remus shrugged. "Snape?"

Sirius started laughing. "Yeah right, I can just see Snape making a potion for Harry Potter. That would be the day. No, it must be someone else."

"There aren't that many people that can make it, though." Remus shrugged again and turned pensive. "I don't really care who made it, personally. I HATE being out of control."

"I know. But look, now with me, the door that I fixed, and the potion, you don't have to worry about anything."



Remus just glared. "Oh nothing at all. Except know-it-all dogs. And I FIXED THAT BLOODY D..." Suddenly, he stopped speaking and tensed. The moon had just rose and a beam of moonlight came in through the window. Sirius turned into Padfoot hurriedly and whined encouragement as Remus painfully changed into a large wolf. Being locked in a cell wasn't as much fun as exploring dangerous forests, but at least they had each other for company. The wolf raised his head, sniffed the air and howled loudly, the lupine instincts still strong even though the potion had squelched the bloodlust. Gleefully, the dog joined in, the harmony of their canine voices echoing down the passageway and through the castle. Harmony in that it sounded good to them, anyway.

Upstairs, Harry pulled a pillow over his head and moaned. This was going to be one long night. He fumbled for his wand. Thank Merlin for silencing spells.

COMING SOON: Harry's birthday, a present, and a conversation.

Keep the reviews coming, I love to see what you think! One insightful person has made a spot on prediction of something that will be happening later (I'm not telling who, though...), and there have been several others really, really close in one way or another. See you all next week! –krtshadow

P.S. you are having problems with not loading pages, see my bio page for a fix. It's too long to put here.

## CHAPTER 19

### Birthday

It was going to be one of those days. Harry could just tell.

His first clue as to the coming strangeness came at about five thirty in the morning. It was at that ignoble time that Dobby carefully tiptoed into the room, perhaps remembering the last time he'd just popped in when Harry was sleeping. "Harry sir?"

Harry, who was currently enthralled in a rather fuzzy dream that somehow involved the Whomping Willow, a couple of arguing snakes and mashed potatoes, mumbled and rolled over, taking his pillow with him to cover his head. "Nermph. Gomway."

Unfortunately, Dobby didn't go away. "Dobby so sorry, Harry sir, but Harry sir need to get up." Harry wasn't looking, but if he had been, he would have seen the look of only barely restrained worry on his face. "There is little problem..."

That woke Harry up. He grabbed his wand from underneath his pillow and sprang to his feet, transfiguring his nightclothes to robes with a wordless wave of his wand. Apparently, he was able to go from half-asleep to quite dangerous in less than three seconds. "What's wrong, Dobby?" His wand was ready and his eyes were gleaming, and he was obviously expecting news of some sort of attack on the castle.

Dobby backed up a step. "No, Harry sir, not problem like that. Problem like..." The elf looked helplessly up at Harry, obviously at a loss to explain himself. "Harry sir come see."

Harry, somewhat confused by this unusual behavior, kept his wand in hand as he followed Dobby out of his bedroom and down the stairs to the main hall. The moment that he stepped outside his room he knew something was wrong. The castle was filled with a strange rustling sound. His instincts told him that whatever it was wasn't dangerous, but he was still wary as he walked through the large doors into the hall. And then his jaw dropped. He'd thought that it had been bad before, but this, this defied comprehension. The entire hall was filled

with owls. There were literally thousands of owls flying around and perching on every available space. The press was so great that the open door invited the overflow to spill into the halls.

Harry was very nearly speechless, but managed an emphatic "What the...?" Grabbing a nearby owl, he yanked the letter off of the owl's leg and opened it. A brightly colored card was inside the envelope and the moment he opened it, confetti rained out and a loud voice shouted, "Happy Birthday!" Harry blinked and shook his head, causing some of the glitter that had landed on his head to softly mist down. Harry ignored it, still stunned by the sight in front of him. What really surprised him was that someone he'd never even heard of had signed the card.

Harry took one more long look at the owls, noticing that more were pouring into the main hall from the owl room all the time. And not all of the owls were carrying envelopes. There were parcels of all shapes and sizes littered everywhere. Obviously some owls had been able to just drop their load and escape the crush inside. Harry pinched the bridge of his nose. To be totally honest, he hadn't even realized that it was his birthday until he'd opened the card. Obviously the rest of the wizarding world hadn't been quite as forgetful. Harry moaned. The owls had now taken over most of the large hallway that led from the main hall to the door leading to the grounds. Suddenly he felt something yank at his sleeve. He looked down to see Dobby. The elf looked worried. "They start coming at midnight. Too many to keep in order. Rully and Dobby try, but too many."

Harry nodded. "Tell Rully to do his best, but not to worry about it. Also, if you can spare any of the other elves to help him, that would be great. And..." A wonderful idea struck him. "...I think the two other wizards would love to help as well. Why don't you go wake them up." Dobby looked uncertain. He still hadn't forgotten how Remus had growled at him a few nights before. Harry continued. "Tell them I said they should. Trust me, they won't give you any problems." Turning back to the owls, Harry put his fingers in his mouth and let out a loud whistle. "All right, listen up! If you can drop your package, do so and get out of here. If you can't, go to one of the elves or one of the wizards that will be in here in a few moments. If all you carry is a letter, turn around and go home!" Harry was tempted to just send

every one of them home, package or not, but it was kind of cruel to make the owls carry the heavy packages back when Harry couldn't really even give them a place to rest for a while. At this announcement, disgruntled hoots filled the air, and none of the owls left. Harry lost patience. "NOW!!!" Power crackled in his voice.

There was a flurry of wings as the majority of the owls vacated the premises in a hurry. Yet, still more were pouring in. Harry sighed and headed back to bed, passing a very sleepy looking Remus and Sirius in the hall.

The rest of the day went in a similar manner. Most of the wizarding world must have been celebrating Harry's birthday. The owls never stopped coming, although with Remus and Sirius' help, Rully managed to keep things at least somewhat organized. Harry spent most of the day trying to help out the elves while avoiding his bondservants, which was somewhat easier said than done. Several of the packages held nasty curses, obviously from some people a little less happy with the state of the world now that Voldemort was dead. After Rully suffered singed ears after only barely ducking an ugly cremation curse on one innocently wrapped package, Harry decided that he had better open all of the packages himself.

So it was that he was sitting in one of the unused rooms off to the side of the main hall after supper, opening packages. The flow of owls was finally slowing down. Harry made a mental note to update the wards around the castle as soon as possible. This was just utterly ridiculous. There had to be a way to keep unwanted owls out. He couldn't take another day like this. He'd end up killing off most of the wizarding world's owl population. Tossing yet another box of chocolates into a stack the size of a small automobile, Harry reached for another package. He wouldn't even have opened the letter if it hadn't been for the stylized M on the seal. It looked like the Malfoy family crest. Harry readied himself to deal with another cursed package and opened the letter carefully.

Dear Potter,

Many happy returns and all that rot. I was looking through the cellars and saw this and thought of you. If anyone deserves to get good and

soused, it's you. But then, you're a bloody Gryffie, you probably can't handle your liquor.

And no, I didn't poison it.

Cheers,

Draco Malfoy

Harry raised an eyebrow and turned to the package. As the paper fell away, Harry blinked. Inside was a very old bottle of Irish firewhiskey. Several hundred year old firewhiskey, to be exact. Harry blinked again. And then immediately tested the bottle and its contents with every revealing charm, curse locator, and poison detection charm he knew. Surprisingly, Malfoy had been telling the truth. He hadn't poisoned or cursed the bottle. Harry glanced at the pile of packages still to be opened and rubbed his head. Then he poured himself a shot. A very small shot, because he wasn't stupid and he certainly wasn't used to hard alcohol.

An hour, another shot, and one hundred and seventy-two packages later, Harry was finished. He been sent nearly everything you could think of, from gag gifts to charmed necklaces to nearly every kind of candy he'd ever heard of and quite a few that must have been invented while he was in prison. Exhausted, grumpy and feeling the effects of the potent alcohol, he sat down in a large chair before the spacious fireplace and tried desperately to keep from thinking morose thoughts. Unfortunately, he wasn't doing a very good job at it. Finally, he gave in to the depressed mood that swept over him, augmented by the alcohol.

It was his birthday. It was supposed to be a milestone, a marker of another completed year and a time to look forward to the next year. A time of joy and celebration and parties. Harry snorted and crumpled up a ball of paper, throwing it into the fire and watching it flame up. Like his life had gone up in smoke in a couple of weeks. Another flaming ball joined the ashes of the first. And now, he was all of twenty-one and he didn't know what to do. Normal people had plans by this stage of their life. Maybe they would have a good job or a job that has opportunities for advancement. Possibly even a wife, with

children in the future. Harry had nothing. He glared at the glass in his hand, slowly swirling the remaining liquid inside.

A knock sounded on the door. Harry turned his head to glance at the closed door. It was likely Dobby or Rully. "Come in." The door opened. It was Sirius. Harry merely looked at him for a moment. Then he turned back towards the fire. "Go out." That would take care of that little annoyance, and Harry could get back to his moping.

Unfortunately, the cursed luck of his day held true. Sirius didn't leave. Harry turned to look at him again, noticing the tense way that he stood and the crease of his brow. He was obviously trying to fight off the pain long enough to accomplish whatever it was he had come to do. Harry resigned himself to it, there was really very little he could do to stop him, besides bodily throwing him out of the room, and while Harry was probably perfectly capable of doing just that, he wasn't in the mood. Frankly, he just didn't care that much.

Sirius finally managed to say something. "Please, will you listen to me?" Harry ignored him utterly, crumpling up yet another ball of paper and throwing towards the fire. "Harry, please?" Sirius voice cracked with a mixture of pain and emotion.

"Why should I?" Harry slowly turned his gaze to his godfather. "Give me one good reason."

There was a long silence. "I don't have one, but you have to know, I'm sorry, Harry. I... please believe me. I swear by my life, I'll never... When I think..." Sirius seemed unable to complete a thought.

Harry cut him off. "Then don't think. There, that solves that. Now will you leave me alone, I was getting nice and drunk and you're interrupting." Harry wasn't so inebriated yet that he actually thought that that would work, but it was worth a try.

Sure enough, Sirius didn't budge. If Harry hadn't been annoyed at his stubbornness, he might have admired it. "Is there anything that I can do to fix this or at least help?"

Harry just watched him, eyes nearly blank. Sirius found this almost more unnerving than his earlier icy stares or fiery glares. "Nothing comes to mind. Other than leaving me alone, but that seems to be beyond your ability to manage."

"I'm sorry about the bond. We were just trying to help."

Harry poured himself another shot, but did not drink. "I don't need your help."

"We didn't know that."

"Well, now you do. Lucky you." Harry took a swallow of the alcohol and felt it burn its way down his throat. "Look, you can apologize all night long, although I wish you wouldn't, but it isn't going to change anything. I don't think you really understand what you did to me."

Sirius met his gaze. "If anyone understands, it's me."

The two innocent Azkaban convicts just looked at each other for a long moment, and then Harry snapped. Moving so quickly that Sirius didn't see it coming, Harry threw the heavy shot glass straight at his godfather's head. Sirius only barely managed to avoid getting hit in the nose. Although he jerked his head and felt it fly by his face, he was unable to avoid the shower of glass that occurred once the shot glass encountered the stone wall behind him. A long jagged shard of glass ripped a shallow cut along his forehead, and Sirius clapped a hand to his head to stop the blood from running into his eyes. He still held eye contact with Harry, who still looked remarkably blank. Finally, something flashed in his eyes, indecipherable because of the speed in which it departed. For a second, Sirius thought that he'd gotten through to him, but then Harry quietly spoke. "That makes you quite the hypocrite, doesn't it?"

Sirius dropped his eyes at that undeniably true statement. "I can't deny that."

"No, you can't. Get out." This time Sirius, his resolve weakened by the continuing pain from both the bond and Harry's cutting words, silently obeyed.

Sirius left quietly, but was inwardly raging himself and at his inability to help his godson. He wandered down the hall, holding his aching and bleeding head and trying desperately to think of way to reach through the mile thick shields that Harry had thrown up around his soul. Harry seemed to be falling into depression, and Sirius couldn't do anything to help. If Harry had had someone else to talk to or be friends with, anyone else, Sirius would have felt much better. But Harry seemed content to be alone, and it worried the animagus. He knew that he didn't deserve Harry's trust again, and deep down even knew that it was highly unlikely he'd ever have it again, deserved or not, but Sirius also knew that Harry needed somebody. The way that things were now, Remus and Sirius were the only options, so they had to keep trying or face the possibility of losing Harry to depression where they hadn't to insanity.

He was so deep in thought that he nearly mowed over Remus, who took one look at the bloody, downtrodden wizard and moaned. "Sirius, you idiot, you went and talked to him, didn't you? Here, let me fix that cut. What did he do, knife you?"

Sirius grimaced as Remus cast a cleansing and healing charm on his forehead. "No, he threw a shot glass at me and it shattered against the wall. And maybe it was idiotic of me, but at least he didn't get mad this time."

Remus stopped what he was doing and shot him an incredulous look. "Padfoot, he threw a glass at you."

"OK, so maybe he was a little mad. But I had to try. It's his birthday, Moony, and he's staring into the fire and getting drunk! I can't stand it!" Sirius looked near tears, but then brightened slightly. "But he listened for a minute, I know it. I saw it in his eyes."

Remus privately thought that Sirius had probably just imagined it, but nodded. "Well, that's good, I suppose. I still think it wasn't the most intelligent thing to do, but you're still alive, anyway. We'll just have to have some patience. It's only been a little over a month and a half."

"Yeah. Ouch, my head is absolutely killing me, I'm going to bed."



Harry, on the other hand, stayed up for most of the night, drinking and staring at the fire and thinking about nothing in particular.

COMING SOON: Harry runs across a very strange door, and the results are... bad.

You really don't want to miss the next couple of chapters. We're now heading back to the scheduled plot! The last 5 or 6 chapters were more just a collection of little incidents that needed to happen to set things up so that you understand the characters a little better. But now, well, interesting things are going to start happening really quickly. =) I know that the last few have been kind of slow, and I'm sorry, this is the first story I've ever written that was anywhere near this long, and my outline was screwed up. I should have combined like the last 5 chapters or so into about 2 or 3. So, I'm sorry and I'll try to give you all some action here quickly. Harry will be heading to the Ministry, Hogwarts, and Diagon Alley soon, but a couple more important things need to happen at the castle first. Thanks for sticking with me as I try to wrestle my plot monkeys into submission. – krtshadow

## CHAPTER 20

### Door

The morning after his little birthday non-celebration, Harry awoke with a severe hangover and so avoided contact with anyone, house elves included, for nearly two days. He discovered that not only was he not used to alcohol, but that aged firewhiskey was probably not the best thing to get started on. Harry was convinced that his hangover was exactly what Malfoy had in mind the entire time, and inwardly swore to send him something nasty for Christmas. Something muggle made and noisy, maybe. Meanwhile, the rest of the castle was probably lucky that Harry felt so bad that he didn't even leave his bed. It's really not wise to let anyone as powerful as Harry get hung over. People tend to get hurt. Or dead.

Somehow, Harry managed to control his raging headache and not blow anything important up, although a clock that was ticking too loudly died a sudden and fiery death, and a bird that innocently chose Harry's window to peck at suddenly found himself banished to somewhere in eastern Germany.

Finally recovered, and now definitely wary of the remainder of the bottle of firewhiskey, Harry decided that a little exploring was in order. He was now reasonably caught up on current events and the events that had occurred during his incarceration, and, he was, quite frankly, getting somewhat tired of sitting and reading. He'd continued his visits with Rudopholus, and although both of them had come to the conclusion that Harry had no gift for swordsmanship, Harry enjoyed the physical activity anyway. But he wasn't in the mood for that right now. First he thought that he would wander towards the library and see if he could find something a little more interesting to read than his stack of newspapers, but after hearing voices in the library, he decided to wait for another, more opportune time to select his new reading material.

Now somewhat at a loss for something to do, Harry wandered down a dark, empty corridor that he hadn't previously examined. Raising his wand, he muttered quietly. "Lumos." The light from the tip of his wand lit up the area nicely, and Harry was able to see where he was. The

corridor wound around in a rather strange manner, turning sharply before ending suddenly. It seemed to be a dead end, except for one solitary wooden door that sat inconspicuously at the end of the passageway. The door was hidden from view unless you stood directly in front of it. Curious as to what type of room would be this far from the main hallway, and what would be inside the room, Harry reached for the doorknob.

Unbeknownst to him, the door was spelled. Deeply spelled, and unfortunately for Harry, time had done nothing to lessen the destructive and deadly spells that lay hidden on and in the door. Spells that were triggered the instant that Harry twisted the doorknob. The resulting explosion of magic rocked the castle, causing dust and small pieces of stone to fall from the ceiling as far away as the library.

Harry never even had a chance to duck, much less protect himself beyond the minimal shielding that he kept going at all times. It wasn't anywhere near enough.

The last thing he felt was the hard stone of the corridor under his back, blood trickling down his face, and a deep darkness surrounding him, crushing both the light out of the room and his consciousness out of his head at the same moment.

His wand rolled from his limp hand and extinguished, plunging the area into complete and utter darkness.

Meanwhile, in the library, both Remus and Sirius looked up in alarm as the sound of the blast echoed slightly down the hall. Sirius lunged forward to grab a shelf of books that had been rather delicately balanced and had begun teetering, and only just managed to save himself from a lot of resorting. Leaning with his back up against the shelf, he looked around with a questioning look. "What the bloody...?"

Remus came around the corner hurriedly. "Padfoot, are you... oh, good. What was that?" He'd first thought that Sirius had done something, but now that he thought about it, the sound hadn't been close enough to have come from the library. If it had, Remus' superior hearing would have been deafened.

Sirius looked blank. "I have no idea, but it sure didn't sound good." He racked his brain to try to think of something innocent and harmless that could cause such a noise. Nothing came to mind, which didn't make him feel any better. His gut told him it had something to do with Harry.

From the look on his face, Remus was getting the same gut feeling. The two old friends shared a look that communicated their unease with the situation and their confusion about what to do now. Remus finally spoke. "Well, we had bad luck last time we barged in on him."

Sirius winced, remembering the incident. "I know. Trust me, I know. But that sounded really big, I mean, that wasn't just a piece of furniture going over, that was an explosion. Unless he was expecting it..." Sirius began to look and feel very worried. "He could be hurt." He could be dead, too, but Sirius refused to say it.

Remus looked grim. "You are right. We don't really have a choice here. Let's just go look for Harry, and if we run across him and he's fine, we'll just leave quickly and hope he doesn't see us."

Sirius nodded, in full agreement with this plan, and they set out. Once outside the library, Remus pulled his wand and muttered, "Point me." The wand jerked over to point down the hall to the right. Pocketing his wand again, Remus nodded in that direction. "I'll take the doors on the right, you take the left." Sirius nodded.

They were beginning to think that the explosion had originated a floor above when Sirius reached the dark corridor. Remus was poking his head into yet another empty room as Sirius made his way down into the darkness. Suddenly he noticed a twinge of the now familiar bond pain. Hoping to avoid another confrontation his angry godson, Sirius cautiously lit his wand and proceeded slowly. The pain got progressively stronger, but Sirius didn't hear any sounds or anything that might mean that Harry was all right, so he gritted his teeth and continued. Poking his head around the last corner, he glanced at the dead end. Nothing seemed to be abnormal here... and then he looked down.

Harry Potter lay on the ground, limp and motionless in a growing pool of blood. His face was trailed with blood and was the color of parchment. Sirius could feel the color draining from his own face as he yelled loud enough to raise the dead. "REEEEMUUUUUS!" Harry didn't even twitch. Sirius dashed forward, ignoring the spiking bond pain, hoping that Harry was alive, not knowing what he would do if Harry was dead. He knelt beside Harry and grabbed his wrist, frantically feeling for pulse. "HURRY!" Remus was the one with more medical training and experience, and this was definitely beyond Sirius' meager skills in that area.

Footsteps pounded along behind him and Remus skidded around the corner. He swore when he saw Harry and this did nothing to make Sirius feel any better, since Remus almost never swore. The werewolf took over the situation immediately, something for which Sirius was extremely grateful. "Don't touch anything other than Harry, Sirius! Move!" Sirius let Remus shove him out of the way. Muttering a long stream of healing spells, Remus quickly moved his wand up and down. "He's alive, but this is more than I've ever dealt with before." He sounded worried.

"Remus, there's no one else. Do your best. Tell me what to do and I'll do it." Sirius was quite a bit beyond worry by now, he was experiencing full-blown panic.

"Right." Remus swallowed hard and got to work, trying desperately to stave off the worst of the injuries, utterly ignoring the minor scratches and cuts that covered Harry's arms and face. They could be dealt with later. If there was a later.

Sirius didn't know what to do, so he just talked to Harry, while anxiously watching Remus cast spells and monitor Harry's breathing and heartbeat. "Come on, Har...ouch!" Sirius growled to himself. It was annoying to not be able to call Harry by name. Not to mention, painful, which on top of the already strong pain just because he was close to Harry, was starting to wear on him already.

"Sirius, hold this here!" Remus tore a long strip off of the bottom of his robe with one hand, while leaving his wand firmly pressed against Harry's chest, where pulsing pink light meant that some spell was

being utilized. He found the head wound, which was the one causing most of the blood on the floor, and pressed the ball of cloth up against it. Sirius replaced Remus and held the makeshift bandage firmly in place, slowing, but not stopping the flow of blood. "Press harder, we have to stop the bleeding!"

Sirius obeyed, cradling Harry's head in his lap and muttering under his breath. "Don't you dare die on me like this H...er...Potter! Hold on! Please, not like this!" Sirius knew that Harry probably couldn't hear him, but that didn't stop him from begging.

"DOBBY!" Remus yelled loudly, and the house elf appeared in a flash.

"What do... Harry sir!" Dobby looked frozen at the sight of Harry's bloody body.

Remus didn't have time to be polite. "I need a room. Nearby. With a bed and as many medical supplies as this castle has."

The elf looked conflicted. "Harry sir order Dobby to check with Harry sir first before doing anything not normal."

Remus swore again. House elves wouldn't go against a direct order. Never had, never would. There was no help for it, they would have to move Harry themselves. He had just begun to order Sirius to help lift him, when he noticed that Dobby was yanking at his sleeve. "What?" The question came out gruff and annoyed, even though Remus knew that it wasn't the elf's fault that Harry had ordered him not to help them without permission.

"Dobby help anyway. Dobby will take you to a room." Remus barely had time to blink in surprise at this distinctly unelfly behavior before he was suddenly transported, along with the limp Harry and Sirius, to a room that Remus remembered sticking his head into mere minutes before. It had been empty then, but it certainly wasn't now. Dobby bustled around hurriedly, obviously bringing in a bed from another room and changing the sheets. Then, while Sirius and Remus maneuvered Harry carefully onto the bed, Dobby brought a small collection of medical supplies. Finally, Dobby lit the fire and pulled

open the drapes to give the wizards plenty of light, and then turned to Remus. "Wizards need anything else? Dobby will get anything!"

Remus couldn't shift his eyes from the spell he was weaving, but answered. "Not right now, but I'll call if I think of anything." Dobby nodded and turned to tiptoe out of the room, a worried look plastered all over his small face. Right before he closed the door behind him, Remus glanced up for a split second. "Thank you, Dobby."

Dobby nodded, shut the door, and then proceeded to clean the entire main floor in a worried frenzy, while keeping himself totally ready for that tug around his ears that would signify that someone had called for him.

Back in the impromptu hospital room, Remus finally looked up, weary. "Well, I've done all I can do."

"Sit down, Moony. If your head is hurting like mine, you'd better sit before you fall." Sirius was handling the pain, but then, he'd had prior experience with it, and Remus hadn't.

"We can't go on like this. We'll have to take shifts, or we won't be able to stay in here." Remus rubbed his head, wincing at the biting pain that was assaulting his temples.

Sirius swallowed and finally worked up the courage to ask the question that was paramount in his mind. "Moony, please tell me he's going to be all right?" Sirius heard the plaintive sound in his own voice, and didn't care if he sounded desperate. He was. He just couldn't stand it that Harry was hurt again. Merlin, hadn't he been through enough?

Unfortunately, Remus wasn't able to give him quite the answer he was looking for. He shook his head, running a hand through his graying hair. "I'm sorry, Sirius, I don't know. I'm pretty sure he isn't going to die tonight, but beyond that, I just don't know. There was more than just the force from the blast, there were a couple of unknown spells involved and I don't think that there is anything to do but hope that they wear off. He'll be physically fine in a couple of days,

but I just don't know if he'll wake in a couple of hours or a day or two, or if the spells are effecting him in some strange way."

Sirius groaned. "What happened, Remus?"

Remus shrugged. "I don't know, but neither of us should go anywhere near that corridor. Harry probably tripped some ancient trap. That's really the only thing that could explain it."

Sirius nodded. "And if it got Harry..."

"Yeah." If it had taken out the most powerful wizard in the world, they had better stay far away from what ever it was. Remus knew in his gut that if Harry hadn't been as strong magically as he was, even Remus' healing spells wouldn't have been able to save him. As it was, it had been a close thing.

"Remus, you should take a nap. I'll stay for a while." Sirius wouldn't take his eyes off of his godson.

Remus looked mutinous at this suggestion. "Why me? You've been here and hurting as long as I have."

Even though Remus was usually the logical one, Sirius knew that he was going to win this argument. "Because you're the one I'm going to come panicking to if anything happens, and you're the one that will have to be here if he gets worse. You need to be rested, just in case."

Remus couldn't argue with this. "OK, but I'm coming back to give you a break in a couple of hours." Sirius knew from experience that it would be exactly two hours on the dot, but at least that would give the werewolf a little time away from the headache that was pounding through both of their heads.

Sirius nodded and watched Remus leave the room. Turning back to the bed, he muttered. "Kid, why do you always get into these things, huh?" Pulling a chair over to the corner of the room, where he was as far away from Harry as he could be and still keep an eye out for any change in his condition, Sirius settled in to wait for as long as it took



for Harry to wake up. When he did, Sirius or Remus would be there to help, bond pain or not.

They would be waiting for quite a while.

COMING SOON: Confusion. Pain. Strange dream worlds. And more confusion, oh yes.

Oh, you guys are sooo lucky that the perfect cliffhanger moment was less than a page into the chapter. I so wanted to leave it with Harry bleeding, unconscious, and alone, but I'm not sure you would read anymore if I started to give you 1 page chapters... that's probably pushing my luck! So you got some more story and I'm off to mourn my unused perfect cliffhanger... well, I'll probably be working on the next chapter anyway. -krtshadow

## CHAPTER 21

### Floating

Harry felt very strange. He wasn't sure where he was, but it was totally silent and he couldn't even hear his own heartbeat or breath. He felt as if he was deep underwater, floating gently, not rising to the top, just dragged here and there by currents that he couldn't define. But it couldn't be water that he was immersed in. Not unless he'd suddenly lost the need to breathe, because his lungs weren't burning and he seemed to be totally dry. When he opened his eyes, he expected to see something, after all that is what usually happens when you open your eyes, but all that he saw was unending white. There was no structure or form in sight. All in all, perhaps strange was a bit of an understatement.

//...ome on, Har-ouch!"

"Sirius, hold this here!" A rustle. Pain. "Press harder, we have to stop the bleeding!"

"Don't you dare die on me like this H-er-Potter! Hold on! Plea...//

Harry winced at the sudden assault of noise. It didn't last very long, and then he was back in the silent white place that was beginning to seriously annoy him with its uniformity. He couldn't think of who that might have been, but both voices had sounded familiar and worried. There had been something else, something important in the timbre of the words, but he just couldn't put a name to it. Everything was just too fuzzy.

Now that he thought about it, everything was pretty bright, too. So bright that Harry had the distinct feeling that he should be shading his eyes. Fuzzy and bright? He'd always had a little bit higher hopes for heaven, and hell should be a little warmer, so where was he? With no way to find out, Harry just floated, knowing without really knowing how he knew that he was heading somewhere, being brought by the currents to some specific place.

//...all I can do."

"Sit down, Moony. If your head is hurting like mine, you'd better sit before you fall."

"We can't go on like this. We'll have to take shifts, or we won't...//

Harry listened to the voices with growing recognition. Remus and Sirius. The bond. A spell on the door. Pain. Harry wanted to cry out from the pain, but he couldn't. Something was keeping him away, dragging him under... and then the pain was gone again, and the white empty place was back. Harry was still floating. Suddenly he stopped, and the feeling of being underwater faded away. Unsure of what to do, and not particularly caring anyway, Harry just lay there, staring up at the unending whiteness.

"Well, aren't you the lazy one."

At the sudden insertion of sound into the white world, Harry jumped about a foot in to the air. He sat up hurriedly, trying to ignore the rather unsettling view of endless whiteness under him. A figure was slowly advancing towards him. It seemed familiar in a very strange sort of way. His jaw dropped and all that he could muster was a weak question. "W-who?"

"Right. Sorry. Introductions before jokes. Hullo, Harry. I'm your father." The figure became more distinct and held out a hand. Harry just gaped at him as glasses, messy hair, and brown eyes became visible. The figure sighed. "You know, your father? James Potter? Dad? Any of this ringing any bells?"

Harry recovered from his shock rather quickly, considering the circumstances. "So, I'm dead, then." He wasn't quite sure how he felt about that.

He didn't have to consider it long. The figure... his father?... chuckled, a deep, clear sound that made Harry want to smile. "I can see why you might think that, but actually, no, you aren't dead."

Harry blinked, now quite confused. "Then... why? Where?"

James smiled. "Sorry, you're not dead, although you came very close. Right now, you're in a dream world."

Harry could hear the blatant doubt in his own voice. "I'm dreaming?"

James shrugged. "Well, that's the closest analogy, yes."

Harry blinked. "Oh." Questions abounded, but one stood out above all the rest. "Why are you here?"

"Well, it seems that my opinion is the one that you want the most." James grinned. "Something your mum didn't particularly care for, mind you. I don't think that she trusts me." The grin became a smirk. "I can't imagine why not."

Harry was pretty sure that he was just hallucinating, but decided to play along. It wasn't like there was anything else to do. There was only so much that a world of white emptiness could do to hold a person's interest, even if they were feeling rather fuzzy. "Your opinion on what?"

With a smooth move, James sat down on nothing, managing somehow to end up next to Harry. "Well, I could give you my opinion on the Cannons' chances of ever making the quarterfinals, but that wouldn't help you much, now would it? Unless you're a betting man and I never noticed." Harry managed a weak smile at this.

//...St. Mungo's?"

"How? We can't apparate out, we don't know where we are. We could be hundreds of miles from England. Portkeys need at least a general starting point as well as the destination, and none of the fireplaces I've run across are connected to the floo system."

"So we're stuck."//

Harry blinked as he returned to where he had been before. His father was waiting patiently beside him. "Uh... sorry."

James shook his head. "Don't be. You can't help it."

Harry didn't know what to say. "Um, so..."

James grinned at Harry's discomfiture. "I'm not planning on giving you The Talk, you know. You can relax a little." He sighed at Harry's 'you have got to be kidding' look. "No? OK. We'll just chat for a while." He looked thoughtful. "Lily and I watched you, you know."

That caught Harry's attention. "Really? When?"

James smirked. "We don't need to sleep anymore."

Harry correctly interpreted this cryptic remark and paled. "No fair! No one else's parents can watch them all of the time!"

James laughed. "I'll have you know, when you die, you're going to be grounded for about thirty five years, adult or not. You'd have killed your mother if she wasn't already dead."

Harry fell silent for a long moment. He didn't really want to bring it up, but he wanted to know. "You saw everything? Azkaban, Voldemort, the spell?"

James looked grim. "Everything. Harry, I want you to know something." He turned to look straight into his son's eyes. "Your mother and I are so proud of you. You took everything bad that life threw at you and still had the goodness in your soul to come out on top and do the right thing. You can't know how much I wish we could have been there for you, but you didn't need us to become a hero." Harry looked skeptical. "No, don't shake your head at me. There's nothing wrong with being a hero. It's being a celebrity that you hate. Being a hero is doing things that are right even when it's hard and you don't want to. And you, Harry, are a hero."

Harry felt like crying. He didn't know if this was real or not, or if he was just delusional, but hearing that his parents were proud of him meant a lot to him, real or not. "Thank you." It was all he could get out.

"You are welcome. Now. I think there are some things that you need to know."

Harry glanced at him curiously. "About?"

James grimaced. "Azkaban, for starters. Or rather, how you got there."

Harry's eyes began to dart back and forth as he stated emphatically, "I don't want to talk about it."

"Frankly, me neither. But there are some things that you should know, and you really aren't letting anyone else get close enough to even talk to you, much less tell you anything."

//...every time I talk to you, you're insane or unconscious?  
Anyway...//

Harry blinked. That was really beginning to get on his nerves. Turning his attention back to his father, he muttered. "Well, I can't exactly stop you, can I. Or can I?" Harry looked hopeful.

"Nice try. Let's just get it over with. Forty years ago, there was an outbreak of disappearances, both muggle and magic. It added up to a large number of people, and to make a long story short, they were being killed in dark arts rituals. Horrible ones, usually requiring live human sacrifice." James' voice was grave. "Albus Dumbledore, while not yet headmaster, held a lot of power already because of his defeat of Grindelwald. He found some information that pointed to a former student of his, but since he'd known and admired him, he didn't pursue the information to the fullest extent, thinking that it was merely circumstantial at best and at worst a deliberate plant to incriminate an innocent man." James paused for dramatic flair. "The student was Tom Riddle, and Albus couldn't believe that they were the same person until Voldemort threw it in his face in the middle of a battle some twenty years later."

Harry blinked, not exactly sure how to react to this. It certainly explained a few things, but in no way excused what had happened. Harry knew his voice sounded bitter when he spoke, but for some reason, here with his father, he was unable to keep his anger bottled

up as usual. "Dumbledore didn't pursue this evidence either. He never even talked to me!"

James nodded. "I know. And trust me, I'm furious about what happened to you, too. I'm just telling you some things you should know. Dumbledore made a huge mistake. But he did have a prior experience that influenced him. And Voldemort knew all this and planned accordingly. The whole set up was made to play to Albus' memories especially."

Harry shut his eyes and winced. "And the others?"

James sighed. "Once Albus was convinced, it was pretty much over. People tend to think that Albus is infallible, something that holds a great amount of pressure." James sent him a cryptic look. "Something that you will likely find out for yourself, one way or another. Unfortunately, although he is very wise, he is also human, and he makes mistakes. So, once Albus believed, then everyone else simply trusted him more than they trusted you. In a strange way, they thought that they were doing the best thing. Even what you would have wanted."

"What?" Harry was flabbergasted at this statement.

"Harry, think about it. You didn't turn evil. You and I know that you never would. But at one time, Dumbledore never would have thought that Tom Riddle would have either. What would you want done, right now, if you knew that you were going to be guilty of mass murder later? They knew that the light Harry would never have wanted an evil Harry unleashed on the world, and so, mistaken though they were, they really did think that they were doing the best thing."

Harry nodded. He did understand that. He didn't like it, but he understood. If he had gone evil, then he would have needed to be kept away from people that he could hurt. If he'd gone evil, though. And he hadn't, and that was the whole point. "That doesn't make it all right, though."

"No, it doesn't. I'm not excusing them. They were all idiots. They hurt you, and for that I'd kill them if I could. Well, at least hurt them really badly."

Harry was skeptical. "Yeah right. Even Sirius? Or Remus?"

James eyes grew hard. "Harry, you won't understand this until you have your own children, but if and when you do, you'll realize that anything or anyone that hurts them is fair game." There was a tense silence for a moment and then James burst out laughing. Startled, Harry shot him a blank look. "Sorry, I... heh... had a thought. Speaking of children, you'd better have sons, Harry, because I doubt very much that any young wizard would care to approach you to ask for permission to date your daughter."

Even Harry chuckled at this, glad for the lightening of the conversation. "If I ever have any daughters, I'll get a plaque made with 'Future Son-In-Laws = Dark Lords in Training' and put it in my study in memory of you." They laughed together for a moment.

//...smiling. I wonder why."

"I don't know, but get some rest, you look..."

"Horrible, yes, I know."...//

Harry shook his head, irritated at the intruding noise. "Why does that keep happening?"

James glanced over at him. "You're just floating in and out of a coma."

"WHAT!?!"

"You'll be OK." James grinned. "Can't kill a Potter with a door, it's entirely too ignoble a death."

Harry grinned at this. "Yeah, I guess. So, you and mum... you're OK?"



James shrugged. "I can't really explain, there really aren't adequate words, but yes, we are fine."

Harry looked down at his hands. "I missed...miss you."

James voice grew rough with emotion. "Oh, Harry, we miss you too. We wanted so much to be there with you and help you, but it just wasn't meant to be."

//...thought I saw him move yesterday."

"Moony, it's been almost two weeks, what if..."

This time it was different. Instead of just hearing sounds, Harry could feel the sensation of lying on sheets and the warmth of the room. He could sense the tension and exhaustion in the voices, and tell from the sound that they were on the other side of the room. He took a deep breath and could hear the rasping sound that it made as the air entered his throat. Footsteps headed his way. "Harry?" It had to be Sirius.

A whisper from Remus, forced and disapproving. "Sirius!"

"What? My headache can't get any worse, it's impossible. Harry, can you hear me?"

Remus spoke to Harry now. "You've been in a coma for thirteen days. We're not really sure what happened, but we found you in a corridor on the second floor." Telling him facts, how typical.

For some reason, Harry couldn't get his eyelids to respond to the open commands that his brain was sending, but he was able to get his mouth in working order. "Door." It came out very weak.

"He's talking!"

"What?"

They spoke together, effectively drowning each other out. Harry mentally sighed. They weren't getting the message. "Don't... touch... door."

"He must mean that door that we found him by."

"OK, Harry, we won't." That was Sirius, his voice shaky for a reason that Harry felt like he should know, but he couldn't seem to remember.

Remus spoke questioningly, a hint of nervousness barely evident in the words. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to rescind that stay away from me order? Just until you are in a condition to give it again?"

Harry figured it out then. That's why they sounded so exhausted. They'd been taking care of him, near him in direct violation of one of his orders. For thirteen days. Harry felt his hold on consciousness slipping. Just before he lost himself completely to the darkness that was sweeping over him, Harry managed a very quiet, "Yes."...//

After the darkness, the bright light of the surrounding area surprised him. "Oh, good, that was a long time. You're getting better." James, who was still sitting beside him, chuckled slightly. "Sirius and Remus are quite relieved that you woke up, you know. You scared them badly. They've been quite creative, trying to come up with ways to help you without being too near you. None of them worked all that well." James muttered the next sentence under his breath, with an exasperated tone. "Could have just had the house elves watch you, it wasn't like anything was going to happen, but nooo."

Harry frowned. "I'm still angry at them."

James nodded. "Yes, I know." He sighed. "You probably think that I'm trying to get you to forgive them." Harry nodded, that was what he thought. "That's not necessarily true. It's your decision. I just want you to think about the rest of your life. If you aren't careful, you're going to be very lonely, and I don't want that for you. If you can't work past their mistakes, and that is what they were, then please consider trying to make a life and family for yourself somewhere. Will you do that?"

Harry thought for a moment. "I'll think about it." It was the best that he could do.

"Good, that's all I ask." James stood up and Harry followed automatically. "Harry, it's almost time for you to wake up." James put his arms around his son and enveloped him in a hug that Harry returned with filling eyes. "I love you, son."

Harry just had to ask, even though he wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer. "Are you real? Or am I just dreaming?"

James stepped back. "A dream could tell you that it was real and vice versa." He locked eyes with Harry, deep brown staring into vivid green. "Does it matter? Everything that I've said is true, but in the end, you will have to decide for yourself."

Harry nodded. The brightness was fading around him. "Goodbye. I love you." The last phrase was whispered softly, but Harry had a feeling that, if this was real, both of his parents had heard.

James suddenly came back into focus. "Ahh! I almost forgot. Merlin, Lils would have killed me! She told me to tell you, and I quote: I love you, but watch your language, young man, or I will possess Molly Weasley and wash your mouth out." James grinned merrily at the incredulous look on Harry's face. "See you later, Harry." And then he was gone...

...and Harry woke up from his coma.

COMING SOON: The long awaited 'Harry talks to walls' chapter, in which our hero makes some decisions.

OK, well, I do have a couple of reasons why they can't just take Harry to St. Mungo's, and all of them are based on my own conjecture regarding what wards are exactly and what unplotable really means. In other words, it could be way off canon, but I can't remember specifics from the book and so just made up my own rules. Remember, neither Remus or Sirius know where they are, and more importantly, how far they are away from anywhere familiar to them. Once again, my assumption is that a normal wizard has a distinct limit

on how far he can apparate. Yes, they know Harry made it from Hogwarts to his castle in one apparation jump, but Harry's not exactly normal, now is he? They could send an owl for help, but besides getting something sent to them, it wouldn't do them much good, because once again, they don't know where to tell someone to apparate in. Sending Dobby for help would be OK, but once again he could only bring things back, not people, because he only found the castle through house elf magic not through actually knowing where it is. So, basically, they are stuck. Umm, that's my story and I'm stickin' to it!

Reviews are greatly appreciated! Thank you so much to everyone who has done so already! –krtshadow

## CHAPTER 22

### Monologue

Harry lay quietly for a long moment, taking in the sensations that came along with being back in the real world. He actually felt relatively well. Whatever spells had been affecting him seemed to have run their course. He opened his eyes, staring up at the ceiling in the dim light from the glowing coals in the fireplace and a few scattered candles. He took a deep breath. As he let the air leave his lungs, he extended his magic in the way that he had done so many times before, strengthening his body as he went. His magic's response was sluggish at first, but soon Harry was able to determine that there seemed to be no permanent damage to either his magical ability or physical body. Relying far more on magic than actual physical strength, Harry sat up and swung his feet around to stand.

The room whirled as he gained his feet, but Harry gritted his teeth and stuck it out. Once the feeling passed, Harry scanned the room. Sirius was sprawled out in a chair in the corner, asleep. The older man looked haggard, as if he hadn't eaten or slept very well recently.

Harry frowned and left the room, moving slowly but with purpose. Once he was out in the corridor, he leaned up against the rough stone wall outside the door of the room he'd been lying in and thought. It took him a moment to remember what exactly had caused him to end up in a coma for... well, at least thirteen days, and probably a few more. He'd gone down that corridor right over there and then there had been a door and then it all went black and painful. And then... his father... and a very strange conversation...

Suddenly footsteps sounded down the corridor. Harry, still deep in thought, hardly even noticed. "Siri... Harry!" Harry turned his head just in time to see Remus wince as the bond pain assaulted him for speaking Harry's name. The werewolf didn't let it stop him, though. "Are you all right? I didn't know that you were up. Sirius was supposed to come get me..."

Harry heaved a silent sigh, reminding himself that Remus was just worried. "I woke up a bit ago, and I'm fine, I think." He had a slight headache, but it wasn't that bad.

Remus was unsure about what to do. Harry seemed to be fine now, but he'd just spent over two weeks in a magical coma. But however much Remus thought it necessary, he seriously doubted that Harry was in the mood for a suggestion regarding a visit to St. Mungo's to make sure he was fine. He was just debating on whether to risk trying to strike up some kind of conversation with the still rather blank looking Harry when the decision was taken out of his hands. The sound of a chair overturning came from inside the room. "REMUS!!"

"Ahh, I don't suppose you told him you were getting up?" Remus had become something of an expert at interpreting Sirius' screams of panic by now.

Harry didn't even have time to answer, much less decide whether he wanted to or not. Sirius came bolting out the door, nearly mowing Remus over in the process. He grabbed the startled and swaying werewolf by the collar and began shaking him, his back to Harry, whom he obviously had noticed. "He's gone, he's not there, he's gone, he's..."

Harry finally spoke up. "He's got a headache, so please shut up now."

Sirius whirled and froze at the sight of his godson. Remus grabbed his friend by the elbow and began steering him away down the hall, speaking as cheerfully as possible over his shoulder to the watching Harry. "Well, call us if you need us..."

Harry had to suppress a small smile as he listened to them bicker all the way down the hall. "Moony! Why are we, no, where are we going? Harry's back there!"

"Yes, now shut up." Their voices were fading with distance so Harry had to strain to hear the next few sentences. "Unless you WANT him to start dishing out orders right now, I suggest you listen to me."

"Remus, ever the voice of reason. But he's hurt!"

"He said he's fine, and frankly..." Harry could hear no more. And then he realized that he hadn't actually suppressed the smile at all and immediately wiped it from his face. He still hated them.

Didn't he?

"Arrgh!" Harry turned, faced the wall and pounded his head against the unyielding stone. Something that, while relieving stress quite well, did remarkably little for the relief of his headache. Quite the opposite, in fact. Think about it, his father had said. And, dream or not, Harry knew that he was right. He couldn't put off thinking about it any longer. He needed to spend some time and work through the feelings of betrayal and loss that he had gathered up in his psyche over the last six years. He had to do it now, before it ate him alive. Just think about it... he wasn't sure if he could. But he was going to try.

Harry started to walk, uncaring of where he was actually headed. He could still feel the hurt of the betrayal that he had felt when he had finally realized that no one was coming for him. The people that he had trusted had actually believed him capable of murder. They were idiots. He was an idiot to have trusted them so much. But... what if he had been guilty? The planted evidence had been well done. Harry knew this as well as anyone, as he'd had the doubtful pleasure of more than a few visions when Voldemort was gloating about how much of a genius he was to have pulled it off. Perhaps the ministry and Dumbledore had been so convinced that they had truly thought that it would just be a waste of the precious truth serum.

Harry had been slowly walking for nearly ten minutes, his brain occupied with the heavy thoughts that were dogging him, when he realized that he'd reached the end of the corridor. Undaunted by the lack of further area in front of him, he turned around and headed back the way that he had come. He didn't particularly care if he walked all night, but he couldn't just stand or sit right now. He had to be moving.

He remembered the long days and even longer nights of the first two years of imprisonment in Azkaban. Without even realizing it, he began muttering to himself. "So close to being in there forever, too. What if they hadn't figured it out?" Then Harry smirked slightly. "Well,

it wouldn't have been the end of the world, but two Azkaban escapees in less than ten years? That would have looked bad on the record, Fudge." Harry gave a small chuckle that echoed down the long empty hallway.

Thinking about escaping from Azkaban brought his thoughts around to someone who had shared his situation. "Sirius." It came out a whisper. At one time, the man was Harry's only hope for anything even close to a normal family relationship. And yet, it had never happened, due to Wormtail, who was very lucky that he had died in the first year of his imprisonment. Harry had not known that the person responsible for his parent's death was only a cell block away until after the traitor's death, or the rat would have soon discovered that there was more to be feared in Azkaban than a few dementors. Harry sighed. It was probably a good thing. It would have been quite enjoyable to torment Peter, but that would have given away the secret too soon, before Harry was ready to take on the combined power of the aurors and order members that would have been sent against him if he had tried to escape so soon. Ironical, it was, that by the time he finally had amassed the power to not only break out, but kill Voldemort as well, they had finally figured things out and saved him half of the trouble. It would have been hard for Harry to do the whole insane escapee from Azkaban bit and still get close enough to Voldemort to pull off his plan.

"I think I could just kill them, if it wasn't so blatantly obvious that they are sorry." Harry wasn't sure what exactly had happened to his previous thought that sorry wasn't enough, but shrugged and stopped walking. He was back where he had started from, near the small room that had housed his unconscious body for several weeks. Looming off to the side was the same dark corridor that he had ventured down a couple of weeks ago. Harry glared, infused with sudden anger. If that blasted door hadn't knocked him unconscious, then he wouldn't have been in a coma, and he wouldn't have talked to his dad, and learned things that made him think when he didn't want to think. If it weren't for that door, he wouldn't be feeling so bloody confused and emotional right now. He wouldn't have a headache, and he wouldn't be pacing down deserted halls in the middle of the night.



That door was going to die.

Harry strode down the small corridor grimly, finally rounding the last corner. Unleashing a little wandless magic, he lit up the area with a ball of glowing light. He looked around. Small pebbles and chunks of rock littered the area, obviously fallen from the ceiling above because of the explosion. The door itself was in pristine condition. Harry walked over to stand in front of it. Glancing down, he winced at the sight of a dark brown stain on the floor. His own blood. His wand lay nearby. With a growl that Harry didn't even try to muffle, he snatched it up and leveled it at the door. "You are going down."

And it did. Because Harry threw everything but the kitchen sink at it. When the dust settled, the only thing left was a pile of ash on the ground and a single hinge dangling cockeyed from the edge of the doorway. "Ha. Take that." Harry pocketed his wand, dusted off his hands with satisfaction and then cautiously approached the opening. He was feeling a little winded, and grudgingly admitted to himself that he probably shouldn't have tried to do quite so much not even two hours after he woke up from a coma. Still, there were some things that just needed to be dealt with right away, and Harry actually felt a little better, at least mentally, now that he'd had the change to blow something, inanimate though it was, to smithereens. He strengthened his shields to the point where he could have walked through an explosion from a good-sized muggle bomb without even feeling it, and then walked into the now open room. And then his jaw dropped. He scanned the room with both his eyes and his magical senses to make sure that what he thought he saw really was accurate.

Sure enough, further examination yielded the same result. The room was empty. No objects, no spells, no hidden doorways, no nothing. It was utterly, totally empty. Harry stared for a moment and then sat down on the hard stone floor and laughed softly in disbelief. "All that for nothing? An explosion, a coma, and having to take out that ruddy door, and all for nothing?" Right in the middle of his outburst Harry realized something. He had spent the last hour talking either to himself or to walls. Neither implied good things about his mental capacity.

Harry rested his arms on his knees and his head on his arms. "Nothing... all for nothing." He muttered quietly to himself. Harry sat there in the semidarkness and thought about his life currently. For as horrible as the last six years had been, he wasn't doing so badly now. He'd had four years of somewhat tolerable dementor free life, even though Azkaban left quite a bit to be desired as a residence. Those first two years though... when the dementors had been affecting him all of the time... Harry shuddered. He was quite sure that he'd been well on his way to losing his sanity permanently. Too many visions, too many horrible memories. And then, either fate or luck had kicked in and Voldemort had unwittingly signed his own death warrant. Harry shuddered again. If he hadn't happened to be having a vision right when the Dark Lord had tried that ritual... Harry didn't even want to think about it. He had very little doubt that if he had missed that pivotal moment, an insane, half dead Harry would have been all that his rescuers would have found.

And now, he had his sanity, although talking to walls made him wonder slightly, and a home. The only thing missing from his long time dream of perfect life was a family and friends. Harry slumped slightly. He just didn't know what to do. He was angry, hurt and confused, and yet, a growing part of him wanted to just move on. What would it hurt, really? Yes, Dumbledore, Ron, Hermione, and especially Sirius had made a huge mistake. But Harry knew now from what he had witnessed, and from what his father had told him, that it had not been intentional or cruel. They had honestly thought that they were doing the right thing, perhaps even the only thing possible. It wasn't likely to be a mistake that they would make again, on the contrary, Harry had a sneaking suspicion that all the evidence in the world couldn't convince them of Harry's guilt now, even if he killed someone in front of a hundred witnesses.

Could Harry hold their mistake against them forever? A part of him said yes, and a part of him said that he had already held on to his anger for long enough. He knew that everyone was sorry. He had seen it in Dumbledore's eyes, in the longing look on Sirius' face, and in Remus' slumped shoulders. He had read between the lines in Ron and Hermione's letter, and knew that there had been far more apologies written, by them and others, than he had ever even opened. They knew what they had done. And Harry knew that he'd never be

able to forget what had happened to him. But could he forgive, even if he couldn't forget? Harry just didn't know.

Voldemort had been the true enemy. He had been the master of plots, and his Slytherin nature had never been more present than the time that he put together the plan to remove Harry Potter from his way. He had even been intelligent enough to know that killing Harry wasn't enough. It was too dangerous because of Harry's uncanny ability to get out of situations that he shouldn't be able to get out of. No, even if he had been able to kill off the boy who lived, it would only have made him a martyr, fueling the light side to fight in Harry's name.

Harry's eyes narrowed. He only wished that he'd been able to draw that final battle out a little bit longer. Tom Riddle had deserved to die a much more painful death than he had. But Harry hadn't been willing to risk losing his perfect opportunity to take the monster off guard. He smirked. He'd managed to defeat Voldemort without the loss of a single extra life. Technically, he hadn't even been the one to kill off the senior death eaters, that had been Voldemort's spell. Actually, Harry had saved quite a few of the death eaters. He would have saved them all if he could have, if only so they could be punished in the way that they deserved. Unfortunately, the dark magic rampant in the vilest of them insured that his light magic couldn't interact to break the link that Voldemort had constructed.

In the end, it had worked out. Voldemort was dead, along with the most evil of his followers, and since Voldemort had spent almost five of the years that Harry had been imprisoned either preparing for or recuperating from that horrible ritual, there actually hadn't been that high of a death toll. Yes, a few aurors had died. There had been some random murders, including two muggleborn Hogwarts students and their families, but on the whole, the second half of the war against Voldemort had been remarkably mild. Especially so if you compared it with the terror and multiple battles of the first half. Would it have been that way if Harry hadn't been condemned to a cell? Maybe, but maybe not. After his rebirth, and Harry's escape from the graveyard, Voldemort had been worried about Harry, frankly more worried than Harry's skills at the time deserved. He most likely wouldn't have risked the ritual unless he was sure that his highest concern, Harry, was out of the way or dead.

Without the ritual, Harry probably wouldn't have had the power to take out Voldemort so bloodlessly. If he'd remained at Hogwarts, causing Voldemort to constantly try to kill him, and forcing other people to protect him, more would have died. It would have been a war, not a single battle. Harry didn't know if the end result would have been the same or not. For all he knew, if Azkaban hadn't happened, perhaps he would have been the one to die in that final battle. Maybe, in the long run, it was best this way. It didn't make it any easier to live through, but maybe the thought would help him live after it.

Harry sighed, knowing that something had changed in his emotional state regarding the rest of the world and especially those he had been close too. He still didn't trust very easily, probably never would again, but neither did he feel the hatred or even active dislike that he had previously. It was time to move on. He would take his time and move very slowly, but his father had been right. If he wasn't careful, he was going to let someone else's mistake, huge though it had been, keep him from being happy. So, hard as it would be, he was going to try to work past it. "I hope this is the right way to go, Dad..."

Harry rose from the floor, realizing abstractly that he'd been sitting there for hours. He stretched, yawned widely, and then looked towards the door... well, technically, where the door used to be. Then, he took a deep breath, nodded slightly as if affirming something deep inside him, and then headed towards the main hall. All of a sudden, he was absolutely starving.

If he had bothered to look at himself, he might have noticed a few changes that had taken place over the night. If he had taken the time to check out the magical auras around him, he would have noticed that the glowing band of energy that was the bond was considerably thinner than it had been the last time that he had looked. It wasn't gone, but it wasn't strong anymore. Harry could have possibly even broken it now, but he didn't notice, so he didn't try. The other change was the addition of a sparkle to Harry's deep green eyes. The glint, although barely visible, spoke of wisdom, a hint of mischief, and most of all, a reawakened enjoyment of life. It fit him well, but once again, Harry didn't even notice.

Harry strode into the hall, managing to cause Sirius to choke in the process. Both Remus and Sirius were there, eating their breakfast and talking in low tones. Harry sat down at the head of the table, quite a ways from where the two older men were now trying to figure out why Harry was breaking with his established routine of avoiding them.

Dobby entered the room with a crack. "Harry sir is better! Dobby was so worried. What does Harry sir want for breakfast?" The elf looked as if he would have hugged Harry's legs black and blue if they hadn't already been under the table, something for which Harry was quite grateful.

"Whatever is fine, Dobby. Maybe some toast." With a wave a rather large breakfast was on the table. With a grin, Dobby left, this time to clean the second floor nonstop in his glee that Harry was recovered.

Rully appeared as soon as Dobby was gone, an armload of newspapers in his small arms. "Master Harry, here is Master Harry's papers."

Harry looked up in surprise. "No letters?"

"Many letters, Master Harry, but none that Rully supposed to give to Master Harry." Rully looked near depression over the fact that he couldn't give Harry any letters.

Harry hurried to relieve the small elf's anxiety. "That's fine, thank you, Rully." As the small elf smiled and left, Harry frowned. Where were the letters from Snape? Harry hadn't got his mail for... he quickly thumbed through the stack of papers... fifteen days. The sneaky potions professor should have sent at least two of his sarcastic but informative missives in that amount of time. Harry's frown deepened, but he decided to worry about it after breakfast. Ignoring Remus and Sirius, who were likely discussing him, Harry took a bite of his toast and reached for the most recent paper.

To say that Remus and Sirius were surprised to see Harry was something of an understatement. Previously, he had never willingly entered a room that they had occupied, and now he was sitting not

fifteen feet away from them, as calm as could be. Sirius quietly muttered to Remus. "Moony, is this good?" He was almost afraid to hope.

Unfortunately, Remus didn't have any answers. "Padfoot, I don't have a clue."

"Me neither, but..." Sirius was not only interrupted, but nearly had a heart attack when Harry suddenly leapt to his feet, knocking over his chair with a loud crash. The look of absolute fury on Harry's face really didn't make Sirius or Remus feel very good about the situation. Harry looked absolutely livid. His face was flushed and he was slowly crumpling the paper in his hands. Sirius swallowed hard, hoping very much that that anger wasn't directed at him. He exchanged a quick look with Remus. Both men unobtrusively prepared to dive under the table, should Harry lose control of his magic in his rage.

"DOBBY!" Harry's voice reminded one of Armageddon itself. The small elf popped into view, but before he could assault Harry with his customary cheerfulness, Harry continued. "I need my cloak." In an instant, it was in his hands. Tossing down the now rather rumpled sheet of newsprint in disgust, Harry stalked out, slamming the heavy door behind him.

Remus was the first to speak. "What on earth set him off?"

Sirius shrugged. "I don't know, but I'm going to find out." Getting up, he walked quickly over to the crumpled newspaper and smoothed it out. The headline leaped out at him.

## FINAL DAY OF SNAPE/MALFOY TRIAL!

Inner Circle Death Eaters Expected to Receive Death or Life Imprisonment Sentence

Closed Trial "Progressing Nicely" Says Minister of Magic Fudge

Sirius' jaw dropped. Neither Snape or Malfoy ranked anywhere on his list of favorite people, but this was ridiculous. He quickly scanned the article. Sentences leapt out at him. 'Headmaster Dumbledore's

testimony denied due to conflict of interest.' 'Blame rests on these two men's shoulders for many deaths and countless pain.' And finally a quote from Fudge, 'The death of our hero Harry Potter must be avenged, he would want us to pursue justice at all costs. Justice shall be served here.'

"Oh Merlin. The idiots." Remus had obviously been reading over Sirius' shoulder. "Condemning them for something they didn't do, for justice and in his name? He is going to absolutely tear them apart."

Sirius moaned. "Bugger! I wish I could be there!" While Harry yelling at him was something Sirius considered highly unpleasant, the thought of watching Harry yell at Fudge seemed like something that would be very enjoyable. Sirius thought that the man was an idiot, and Harry seemed adept at pointing things like that out in the most painful way possible.

Suddenly, the door banged open. Both men jumped, and Sirius dropped the paper hurriedly. They glanced with apprehension at Harry, who stood in the doorway, still fuming, but now looking slightly embarrassed as well. There was a long moment of silence, and then Harry spoke. "Umm... do either of you know how to get to the Ministry?"

COMING SOON: A trial gone amuck and Fudge makes some serious mistakes.

Sorry, those of you who wanted Harry to hate forever. I did consider it, but it just didn't seem to work for me... and trust me, he's still not in the mood for a group hug just yet. Anyway, let me know what you think about this chapter. It's very long and mostly just Harry's thoughts, but I think that it is important. If it seemed a little confusing, that's mostly because I was trying to get Harry's view, and I think that one of his biggest emotions is confusion right now. Which is why this chapter didn't really end up as funny as I had originally intended it. I ended up cutting most of the funny talking to walls part because it just didn't seem to fit, it cut down on the seriousness of the topics that he was talking and thinking about. I'll try to work the funny stuff in somewhere else, but we will just have to see. Next up, the chapters that I have been looking forward to writing for quite a while now...

wanders off, humming and rubbing hands together merrily –  
krtshadow



## CHAPTER 23

### Testimony

Ten minutes later, a cloaked Harry walked a half step ahead of both Sirius and Remus, who, although they weren't really exactly sure how or why, were accompanying Harry to the Ministry. Sirius especially was confused but hopeful that Harry's new tolerant attitude towards them was permanent. So far, Harry hadn't yelled at him, thrown anything at him, or even shot him one of those blank, empty stares that made Sirius want to slit his own throat with remorse and guilt. Of course, it wasn't yet ten o'clock, so he tried not to get his hopes up too high. At least Harry hadn't ordered them to stay away from him yet. Sirius could only pray that this would last.

Harry, oblivious to the amount of thought that Sirius was putting into his behavior, contented himself with quietly fuming behind the hood of his cloak. The Ministry, and particularly Fudge, was trying to do it again. While Harry wouldn't necessarily call either Snape or Malfoy the epitome of innocence, they certainly had done their part in the war against Voldemort and if anything, they deserved to be recognized and rewarded for that, not punished.

Harry was far from stupid, he knew exactly what was going on. Voldemort had been defeated, and to Fudge's absolute dismay, there was not even one little part of his defeat that he could lay claim to. In an election year, he needed to look as if he was a huge contributing factor to the safety of the wizarding world, regardless of the fact that he wasn't really a factor at all. Stuck, he did what any crooked politician in need of votes would do. If there wasn't anything that he could make stirring speeches about how necessary he was to the ministry, he made something up. In this instance, it had been quite easy for Fudge to use his power to legally attack two men who had long been thought to be death eaters, and blame them for everything that they couldn't directly pin on someone else. The younger death eaters, desperate for a lighter sentence, were quite willing to testify to whatever Fudge or his minions told them to. And Fudge, happy at the large amount of press attention this trial was garnering him, got the credit for taking care of two of the 'most dangerous death eaters'.

What infuriated Harry the most was that Fudge dared to use Harry's name in an effort to draw support to the illegal and totally unethical trial that was going to place two more people in Azkaban when they were innocent of their charges. That was if they weren't straight out killed. All in the name of justice, of course. Fudge probably didn't even know the meaning of the word. Or worse, he just didn't care. That was a big mistake on his part, and Harry fully intended to educate him regarding the stupidity of it.

Thanks to Remus' knowledge of the ministry, they had taken a roundabout way of reaching the judiciary wing, and had so managed to avoid the reporters and gathered crowd that awaited the forthcoming verdict. As they neared the courtroom where the trial was being held, a squad of five aurors stopped them. The leader stepped forward. "Halt! By the order of the minister of magic, this is a closed trial. No reporters or public allowed."

Harry tried to remain calm, knowing that these people couldn't really help their orders. "I'm not a reporter or really just the public. I have evidence for this case."

The auror looked bored. "Sorry, no one is allowed in."

Harry's voice took on an annoyed tinge. "I can prove their innocence."

Then the auror in charge made a mistake that he'd be remembering with horror for a long, long time. He got right up in the Harry Potter's face, although technically he didn't know who it was, and raised his voice. "Listen here, I don't care if you are Merlin himself, you are not going into that courtroom, witness or not." Harry, angered at this, threw back his hood. The auror gaped at the hair, the eyes and the scar and then stepped back. "Right, Mr. Potter. The door is that way."

Harry didn't even spare him a second look. He swept by, heading for the door. However, he hadn't taken four steps when a scuffle broke out behind him. Harry turned. Remus was being manhandled by a couple of aurors. Sirius, furious at this, was trying to fight his way to his friend. Harry heaved a huge sigh, catching the attention of everyone. "What is the problem?"

"Sir, this is a well known werewolf. I can't let a dangerous creature into the courtroom. It might attack the minister." The self-righteous tone that the auror had adopted grated on Harry's nerves. The 'dangerous creature' in question looked both resigned and faintly hurt at this statement and being called an 'it'. Sirius just looked furious.

Not quite as furious as his godson, though. Racism was something that Harry just couldn't tolerate. Not only was it stupid, harmful to society in general and innocent individuals in particular, but it served absolutely no point. Harry stalked forward and lifted the once again highly mistaken auror by a combination of a hand on his collar and a healthy bit of wandless magic. It must have looked very impressive, since the four other aurors began backing towards the nearest exit. Harry glared and growled. "Let me make this perfectly clear. I, and my companions, BOTH of them, are going in there. If you try to stop ANY of us, I will PERSONALLY show you a lot more dangerous creature than you ever signed on for. Got it?" The auror's eyes rolled back and he went limp. Harry dropped him. "Guess so. Git."

Then, followed by Remus, who wasn't able to hide his smirk as he stepped over the unconscious auror, and Sirius, who was now trying to figure out the exact meaning of the word companion and what Harry may or may not have meant by it, Harry headed into the courtroom.

Meanwhile, Severus Snape was having, with the possible exception of the day that he'd gotten the mark from the Dark Lord's wand, the worst day of his life. Fudge was totally in control of the court, the judge, and the jury. This trial was about as fair and balanced as the likelihood of a Hufflepuff deciding to attack a dragon. Snape had woken up this morning with a sinking feeling, and now, chained to a chair beside a defiant and nervous looking Draco, he knew that it was over. The sinking feeling had sunk. They were going to prison. Snape wasn't sure if he wanted the death penalty or not. If it had been the old dementor infested Azkaban that they were heading to, he would have hoped, even prayed for the killing curse, but the dementors were gone now. Snape didn't even let that bit of good news cheer him up.

Currently the courtroom was in the middle of hearing yet another junior death eater shorten his own sentence by listing the atrocities that one or the other of the accused had supposedly done. Not even a fraction of them were true, and those few that were had been unavoidable if they had wanted to keep their status and continue to give useful information back to the order. Fudge had denied both Snape's original request that the witnesses be questioned under veritaserum, and his final desperate demand that the accused themselves be allowed to testify under whatever truth potion the court deemed necessary.

Fudge wasn't letting any order members even in the courtroom, much less testify, even though every one of them could have testified to both his and Draco's spy work. The minister had actually had the nerve to deny Albus Dumbledore the right to defend him. Snape shook his head slightly in disbelief at the thought. The situation was hopeless, but he'd be damned if he was going to give Fudge the satisfaction of seeing him squirm. Snape shut his eyes and purposely looked bored. It annoyed Fudge, and frankly, with only prison or death to look forward to, Snape wanted to take this last opportunity to annoy as many people as possible.

Suddenly, the door to the courtroom banged open. Snape instinctively opened his eyes at the sound and then ceased to look bored at all. Every eye in the courtroom was drawn to the figures entering. Well, technically, once their eyes hit the first to enter, the other two were largely ignored. Harry Potter himself, obviously ignoring the fact that Fudge had announced his death two weeks before, strode into the room and down the center aisle, cloak flowing around his shoulders as if it was alive. His eyes were reminiscent of the faint hint of bright green that sometimes occurs in the hottest of fires, and he looked every bit the powerful wizard he had become. The courtroom erupted into whispers and movement.

Snape had never been so glad to see a Potter in his entire life. Beside him, Draco slumped slightly in relief. Surely Potter wouldn't allow this horrible excuse for a trial continue. Fudge, however, was stunned. Stunned and quite intimidated, not that he'd ever admit that to anyone. However, one does not get to be minister of magic without learning to roll with the punches, so he actually recovered quite

quickly. He found his voice just as Harry neared the judges' bench that he sat behind. "Why, Mr. Pot..."

Harry was quite aware of the effect he was having on the room, and, quite frankly, was enjoying it immensely. Fame did occasionally have good sides. Although he had relieved a little of his anger on the misfortunate auror outside, he still had plenty of venom in his voice as he interrupted Fudge coldly. "What is this?"

Fudge sputtered for a moment. "Well... er... yes... Well, Mr. Potter... er, can I call you Harry?"

Harry lifted his chin slightly. "Absolutely not." The disdain in his voice was glaringly evident.

This flustered Fudge even more. "Umm, well, perhaps I could speak to you in just a few moments, Mr. Potter, but we are in the middle of a rather important trial right now. If you will excuse me for a moment, we can finish it up. Perhaps you'd like to wait in my office?" Fudge sounded hopeful that Harry would take him up on the offer and leave.

He was doomed to disappointment. Harry folded his arms. "No. Answer my question." At Fudge's blank look, Harry sighed and repeated himself. "What is all this?" He waved a hand at the two prisoners.

Fudge smiled weakly. "Well, you see, these are two of the most prominent death eaters. Members of the you-know-who's inner circle. Their dark magic allowed them to survive while the others didn't and the Ministry of Magic has a responsibility to the people to see that no further damage is done by them. I will do my duty." By the end of this speech, Fudge could hear the agreeing murmurs of the majority of the watchers, and had regained a little of his courage. "So, Mr. Potter, you are welcome to stay and watch, but we really must be moving on now."

Snape was watching all this with great interest, wondering what would happen next. To his surprise, Harry actually relaxed a little and adopted an almost apologetic tone. "Oh, of course, actually, in that case, I'd like to testify. I believe that I can shed some light on the dark

activities of the accused, since I certainly knew of them." Snape would have been slightly concerned by this about face, but he had a prime view of Harry's face. For a split second it brought back old memories of James Potter right before you walked under a bucket of something smelly. For once, Snape didn't mind seeing that look on someone's face at all.

Fudge, looking somewhat gratified by Harry's rather unexpected compliance, didn't catch the scheming look that flitted across Harry's face. But both Sirius and Remus did, and both of the marauders found seats in the back of the courtroom to watch the fun unfold. Sirius couldn't wipe the smirk off of his face. He had been right. Watching Harry force Fudge to dig his own political grave was going to be fun. Fudge conferred with an aide, and Remus' hearing could pick up a muttered word here and there. "...old school enemies... hated them both..." Then Fudge looked up and sent a sickeningly sweet smile at the still waiting Harry. "Of course, Mr. Potter. Please, take the stand."

Meanwhile, outside in the press room, assembled members of the Order stood talking and waiting for the verdict, including most of the Weasley family, a tired looking Dumbledore, and Alastor Moody. Moody was in the process of garnering some very strange looks from his colleagues, since he hadn't stopped staring through the courtroom wall for more than five minutes. He didn't seem to be able to stop laughing long enough to relay what was causing this uncharacteristic burst of hilarity, and to be quite frank, no one was quite sure if they wanted to know what would cause the grizzled old man to laugh like that.

Back inside, Harry sat calmly in the witness box and repeated the truth oath as it was read to him. The female interrogator stepped forward. Harry instantly disliked her. He wasn't quite sure what it was, but something about her instantly set his teeth on edge. "Mr. Potter, you have been present as several death eater gatherings, correct? And at these gatherings you saw both of the accused committing grievous crimes, correct? Perhaps murder?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Are you going to let me testify or are you planning on doing it yourself?"

"Hem hem. Just answer the question, Mr. Potter." The woman gave Harry an intimidating glare. That is, it would have been intimidating for nearly anyone else, but Harry didn't even blink. He was far beyond the point of a simple stare being able to cause him any concern.

Harry shot her a small, sarcastic grin, which caused her to blink in surprise. "Very well. Yes, I was present at several of the meetings, and I did not recognize either Malfoy or Snape at any of them." Fudge's jaw dropped. The annoying interrogator gaped. Harry continued, donning a fake helpful look. "You are aware that all the death eaters wore masks? It would be impossible to identify a death eater by face." Feeling that people of such low IQ probably needed further explanation, he continued, speaking as if he were talking to a very young child. "That's why they wore the masks. Even voice recognition would be impossible, since the masks muffled them." Harry ignored the interrogator's efforts to interrupt and continued. "In fact, the only real way to tell if a person is a death eater is to check for the dark mark." Harry twitched his finger slightly, not even bothering to pull his wand, and both Snape and Malfoy jumped slightly as their sleeves rose to above the elbow, revealing conspicuously bare arms. "Why, look at that. Fudge, are you sure you have the right people?"

Fudge stood from his seat and leaned over the podium, fists clenched on the edge. His face was red as he growled. "Potter, what are you on about?"

Harry finally unleashed what Sirius had mentally named the death glare and aimed it at Fudge, causing the minister to swallow convulsively. "I will tell you exactly what I'm on about. This trial is an absolute farce, Fudge, and you know it. You have denied these people their rights to a defender, witnesses to their favor, and the publicity of an open trial. That in and of itself is a crime. Not to mention, in this case, it is easily provable that they are innocent. As the one person that would actually know, I can guarantee that both Voldemort..." At this, most of the room, including Fudge, flinched. "...and all of his loyal inner circle are dead. Both Snape and Malfoy are obviously alive, and have no mark, so it follows that they are

neither inner circle or death eaters at all. Now, quit this idiotic vote mongering and release them."

Fudge exploded, his pride cut too deeply not to try to retaliate. Unfortunately, since Harry had kept his temper and outlined the truth plainly, he didn't have a whole lot to work with. Which was exactly the way that Harry had intended it. This was too important an issue to let slip by because he desperately wanted to call Fudge a few nasty names. There might be time for that later, but not right now. So Harry listened calmly to Fudge's outburst. "YOU CAN'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!" Harry merely raised an eyebrow. Snape bit back a chuckle, noticing as he scanned the room that nearly everyone present was on the edge of their seats, watching the verbal battle with wide eyes. Fudge continued furiously. "I'm the Minister of Magic, and if I say so, I'll send them both to Azkaban."

Harry stood and calmly folded his arms, exuding menace and power. "I'm Harry Potter, and if you do, I'll break them out." There was no tinge of humor in his voice, only certainty.

In the back of the room, Sirius snorted loudly at the look on Fudge's face, and then quickly dodged Remus' elbow. Fudge looked quite humorous, to be sure. His face was red, his eyes were nearly popping out of his head, and on top of it all, his bowler hat had slid off of his head, leaving his carefully combed over hair looking frazzled. He sputtered angrily. "That's illegal! That's a threat! Auror, arrest this man!"

The solitary auror guard who had been standing by the door took one look at Harry and shook her head hurriedly. "Not a chance. I just retired."

Remus muttered under his breath. "Smart girl."

Meanwhile, Fudge was nearly apoplectic with rage, but then his canny political sense kicked in. This situation was hopeless. He had lost the support of the audience, and even his own supporters seemed to have changed alliances. He just couldn't compete with Harry Potter in popularity. Not right now anyway. He decided to cut his losses. "My, my. Mr. Potter, you have saved us from making a



dreadful mistake. Auror, release the two prisoners, they are free to go."

Harry remained standing while the chains were removed from the two former death eaters. "Good. I'm quite sure you will be making a statement regarding their innocence." It was not a question.

Fudge grimaced at this, but had very little choice but to nod in agreement. It didn't help his pride that both of the formerly accused were sending him distinctly Slytherin smirks. Harry walked over to talk to the smirkers. Snape spoke up as he approached. "Honestly Potter, did you have to wait until the last day?" He sounded grumpy, but a blind man could sense the relief in his voice.

Harry looked slightly embarrassed. "Uh, sorry about that. It's been an... interesting couple of weeks. Although..." Harry smirked wickedly. "...I might have left it for the last day just out of spite."

Malfoy sneered. "I wouldn't put it past you. Dammit, Potter, I can't keep owing you these debts. It's causing generations of Malfoys to spin in their graves."

Harry waved it off. "Forget this one. I needed an excuse to set Fudge straight. Not to mention, the Potter's probably wouldn't be all that happy about me bailing out a Malfoy either."

The courtroom was clearing slowly and the babble of reporters could be heard from outside the double doors. Remus and Sirius were watching from just inside the courtroom, and Fudge could be heard making a statement. Harry, perhaps stupidly, trusted Fudge to make his own announcements, and, catching Remus' eye, he jerked his head towards another exit. The last thing that he wanted right now was to get mobbed by reporters. Remus snagged Sirius and they headed to meet Harry.

Harry was actually somewhat proud of himself. He hadn't lost his temper, yelled at Fudge, called him any names or hurt him. He had a feeling that his mother would be proud. He'd defused a bad situation without violence. Fudge would have a hard time rebounding from this fiasco, so even the goal of making sure that he didn't get reelected

was already well on its way to being accomplished. Harry figured that a nice letter or two to the Daily Prophet regarding his non-supportive stance on Fudge's reelection would finish the annoying minister off nicely. So, Harry was just moving to leave when he heard faintly something that caused all of his former anger to start bubbling back up to the top.

He stopped suddenly, causing Sirius to ram into him and start apologizing profusely, and Malfoy and Snape to chuckle wickedly at the sight. Remus just rolled his eyes and asked if everyone was OK. Unfortunately, all this babble made it very difficult to hear, so Harry turned and hissed angrily. "Shut up." Perhaps it was the anger in his voice, or maybe it was the reawakened gleam in his eyes, but dead silence fell immediately.

From outside the main door, Fudge could be heard speaking over the noise of reporters and questions. "...heard correctly, yes. Harry Potter, our hero, is alive and has brought forward new evidence in this trial causing the conclusive decision of innocence. He has also thrown his full support behind my campaign for reelect..."

Draco Malfoy, as the one person present that hadn't seen Harry furious yet, nearly fell out of the way as Harry started stalking towards the press conference. He gulped slightly and turned to Snape, who was also looking a little stunned at the look on Harry's face and the anger visible in every line of his body. "What's he going to do?"

Remus spoke, but didn't answer the question. "Oh, he shouldn't have said that. Not until Harry had left anyway."

Sirius was rubbing his hands together gleefully. He'd been somewhat disappointed by the lack of fireworks inside the courtroom. "This is going to be fun."

And for once, both Gryffindors and Slytherins found themselves in complete agreement, as they followed along in Harry's wake. Fudge was going to get his, and they were going to enjoy it immensely.

COMING SOON: Harry crashes the press conference and tells Fudge, the ministry and the wizarding world exactly what he thinks.

Urk, it got long again. See what I mean about never coming out the amount of chapters I plan? According to my original rough outline, I should be on about chapter 13. So much for that! And this stuff was only supposed to take one chapter, but I started actually filling out the chapter and it grew. So, now it's going to be two. Next one coming up soon, sorry about the wait for all you Fudge bashers, trust me when I say that Sirius will get to see his fireworks. – krtshadow

## CHAPTER 24

### Press

Fudge had made his final mistake in a career full of them. But this one would be his undoing. If he had waited just a few minutes longer to make his claim about Harry's support, the rather shaky façade of his popularity might have lasted another day or two, at least until Harry had heard about his claim and denied it. Even then, Fudge still might have been able to pull out of it, because retractions never quite get the same amount of attention as the headlines do. But Fudge lied right then, and Harry had heard and frankly, it was just the last straw added to the back of a camel that had several bales too many loaded on already. Harry saw red. It was just too much. His mother would just have to understand. There were times when holding your temper in check wasn't feasible.

He stormed out on to the platform where Fudge was proudly making his announcement, ignoring the gasps from the assembled crowd at the sight of him coming up behind the minister. Gasps that were soon followed by a storm of clicking, flashes, and hurried scribbling as the assembled reporters got the scoop of their lifetime. Harry Potter was alive. Harry Potter looked sane. Harry Potter looked healthy and powerful.

Harry Potter was also yelling at the Minister of Magic. "YOU INSUFFERABLE, INSIGNIFICANT, ANNOYING, LITTLE GIT! I WOULDN'T EVEN VOTE FOR YOU, MUCH LESS GIVE YOU MY SUPPORT!" Yes, this was going to be quite the story.

Fudge cringed and hurriedly moved to put the podium between Harry and himself. The reporters scribbled busily and many were grinning widely. Fudge had not endeared himself to some of the reporters, especially those who didn't like it when he ordered the information in some of their stories 'rearranged' for the public good. Several had spoken to colleagues and wondered just when the public good had turned into Fudge's good. But no one had dared to do anything more than grumble very quietly about it. Fudge was the Minister of Magic.

Harry didn't care. Fudge's idiocy had gone too far. He took a deep breath, and controlled his temper the best that he could. It wouldn't do to start cursing the quivering lump of stupidity in front of him. Now that would certainly be an unfair duel. No, once again, a verbal assault was the best way to go. Fully conscious of the fact that everything that he said was likely to be in the newspaper the next morning, Harry continued his rant. "Fudge, you're an idiot. You couldn't administer your way out of a paper bag! You're almost as dangerous as Voldemort himself, but in a different way. You consistently put yourself and your interests ahead of the people. **THE PEOPLE THAT YOU ARE SWORN TO PROTECT!**" Harry shook his finger in Fudge's face.

Sirius just grinned, and muttered to Snape. "This makes coming to save your arse actually worthwhile, Snape."

Snape sneered in response. "Unfortunately, even this isn't worth seeing you, Black." Actually, Snape would have put up with a lot more than just seeing Sirius for the pleasure of watching Fudge cower, but there was no way on this world that he would ever admit that to his rival.

Remus broke in. The two enemies had been forced to come to some terms in the last few years, because of the war, but they were still far from friends. It wouldn't do to have one of their, now rare, but still very violent, verbal brawls right here. "Unless you two are prepared to deal with Harry yelling at YOU, I suggest you shut it."

Sirius paled at the thought. Snape found this humorous and sneered. "So, Black, scared of your own godson?"

Sirius grinned slightly at this. "Snape, when he took out Voldemort, he was only mildly annoyed. Yeah, I'm scared of him." That shut Snape up admirably. Which, as he later explained to a disapproving Remus, was one of the few joys Sirius had left in his life.

Meanwhile, Harry had backed Fudge completely around the stage once, and was now starting in on his stupidity. He had already covered his carelessness and his greed. "Not only did you have me put in prison without proper regard for the due process, OR

VERITASERUM, which, incidentally, WOULD HAVE PROVEN ME INNOCENT, but now you have the utter and absolute gall to try to do it again, to two men innocent of the crimes that YOU accused them of. And why did you accuse them? Hmmm? Care to tell the reporters that?" The aforementioned reporters were grinning as one. It wasn't everyday that a normal press conference turns into something like this. Harry continued, as unstoppable as the tide. "For votes! That is the only possible reason for you to persecute two people who served the light in a way that no one else could. You were willing to sacrifice them and all so that YOU LOOKED BETTER! They didn't do anything but help the light side! Where do you think Dumbledore got all the inside information that you would always ignore?"

Fudge sputtered incoherently. Out in the crowd, most of the members of the Order were watching with awe as their non-esteemed minister was taken down a few pegs. Dumbledore, however, was looking at Remus. He raised a questioning eyebrow at the werewolf. He knew that he could count on the former professor to give him at least some idea of what the situation with Harry was at currently. He only let himself relax a little when Remus mouthed back, "Better, but slow." He sighed in relief. This was one time that he had been right. Harry would heal, but it would just take some time.

Meanwhile, Harry was relentlessly questioning the minister, but not really giving him time to answer. Not that Fudge was currently capable of even telling someone his name at the moment. He was discovering something that Sirius, Remus, Dumbledore and possibly even Voldemort had learned the hard way. Do not, under any circumstances, be the catalyst that causes Harry Potter to lose his temper. If it is unavoidable that you do so, it is very wise to have either an escape route or earplugs. "Why exactly didn't you let anyone see the trial today? Since when is Albus Dumbledore not a good enough witness for you? Would you like the world to know about the many people that you let off the hook because of their political power and the votes that they could bring you?" Harry actually had no idea if this was true or not, but Fudge just whimpered, so he knew that he must have made a lucky guess. "How you knew that Voldemort was back for a good three months before you announced it?" Harry took a deep breath and spat. "Even your

realization came a year after you had eyewitness testimony, ME, to his return!"

Harry folded his arms and looked mean. "And you have the nerve to try to run for Minister AGAIN? You should have resigned years ago out of pure incompetence!" Fudge, now bright pink with embarrassment and fear, hurriedly backed out the door. Harry didn't follow, something which made the minister extremely happy, but the younger man's words continued to follow him as he fled back towards his office. "FUDGE, I'D VOTE FOR A MUGGLE BEFORE I'D VOTE FOR YOU!"

Harry gave a grim little snort and turned back towards his audience, surprisingly unembarrassed after his outburst. He scanned the crowd, noticing the Order members and skimming right over them. One reporter mustered all of her nerve up and called out. "Mr. Potter, would you possibly answer a few questions for us?" Nearly everyone in the building expected him to say no.

He didn't though. He merely folded his arms, somehow managing to look dangerous, totally in control of the situation, and like the boy next door all wrapped up into one package. "I can't promise I'll answer them all, but I can spare a few minutes."

Everyone looked to the brave reporter, who, suddenly feeling the pressure, gulped and spoke up again. "Mr. Potter, the minister recently reported that you were presumed dead. It seems pretty obvious, but will you comment as to your health?" That seemed like a rather safe question.

Harry picked up on the mass nervousness of the crowd, and relaxed a little. "I am perfectly healthy. I fear Fudge just couldn't find me and so assumed the worst. Not to mention the fact that he would much prefer that I was a martyr than someone who would tell the truth about him and what he tries to get away with."

Another man spoke up from the other side of the room. "Mr. Potter, since you obviously don't support Minister Fudge..." A nervous laugh ran around the room at the understatement. "Who do you support? Or will you run yourself?"

Harry thought about that one for a moment. "Well, first of all, I don't know who else is running, so I can't give an opinion on that. I also think that the people should decide for themselves who they want in a position of leadership, not just blindly take my recommendation. As for me, no, I won't be running for Minister at this time."

"Why not, sir, no offense, but you'd likely win with votes to spare."

Harry nodded. "Probably. However, just because I could win doesn't mean I should. I'm not saying that I wouldn't consider it at a later time, I'd have to approach that as it came up, but for right now, it just wouldn't work." He sighed. "I've been in prison for years, and I'm still putting my life back together from that. I have no idea how to run a ministry, and on top of that, I think I need to give my grudge at the Ministry a little more time to die. It wouldn't do to be blowing up the ministry building. Kind of hard to explain to the taxpayers..." Everyone laughed. Harry had them all wrapped around his finger.

"Sir, how did you survive Azkaban with your sanity intact?" This came from the back, and was yelled loudly. Silence fell over the crowd at the mention of Harry's imprisonment.

Harry frowned and the reporter flinched almost imperceptibly. However, Harry just sighed and motioned for the next question while calmly stating, "No comment on that one."

"Sir, what are your plans now?"

Harry grinned. "Well, my plans in the immediate future include figuring out some way of stopping the boatload of fan mail I get everyday and taking a nap. Beyond that, I have no clue." Even if he'd had plans, he didn't really want the whole world to know them anyway.

Rita Skeeter stood in the back of the room and yelled out. "Potter, now that you've ruined Fudge's life in revenge for what was done to you, who's next on your list?" Silence fell over the room, and more than one honest reporter shot death glares at Skeeter. If she ruined the one chance they had to get information from that automatic paper seller named Harry Potter...



Harry clenched his fists and glared. "I'm tempted to make it you, Skeeter. In fact, although I don't and never have had any type of a list, I might make one just for you." Then he sighed. "It's rather obvious that I don't like Minister Fudge, and frankly, I think next to anyone could do his job better than him, but I do not want to ruin his life. I just don't want him in a position to ruin anyone else's life."

"Do you think that criminal charges should be filed against Minister Fudge? Say for neglect or abuse of power or something like that?" This was from the young woman who had been the first to speak.

Harry's face grew stern. "Not unless you plan on filing charges against most of the wizarding world." He pointed out at the audience. "You, and the readers of your papers, tend to forget your responsibilities to our society. Everyone is quite eager to cheer someone else on to handle the problems that come up, but very few of you have any desire to help at all. In this way the Muggles have one up on us. If one of their leaders had done even half of what Fudge had done, he or she would have been out of office in no time at all. The citizens bear just as much guilt for not holding their leaders accountable as Fudge does for abusing the power that comes with his position."

Quills were scribbling furiously. Sirius just looked down, so proud of his godson at that moment that he could have cried. James would have been so pleased to see a son of his using his position in the world to change things for the better. James had always been the crusader, and it seemed that Harry shared some of the same traits. Harry, however, had the capability of reaching far more people with his opinions and ideals. Sirius wondered if Harry would be minister someday. Perhaps he was somewhat biased, but Sirius thought that he would make a very good one. After everything that had happened to him, Harry still cared.

Harry continued. "What you all fail to realize is that even Voldemort... oh, don't flinch, he's dead, and this time he won't be coming back, there's no good reason not to say his name. Voldemort, while powerful, while having many followers, while being a dark wizard, didn't actually have anywhere near enough of either power or

followers to stand against all of you." Once again, he pointed out at the crowd. "Especially at the beginning. If you had ALL stood up for what you believed, instead of just a few of you, like the Order of the Phoenix, this war wouldn't have been half so deadly. But your prejudices and your laziness stopped you from helping, and instead you all just waited for a hero. Well, you got lucky this time. Voldemort's dead. But imagine your world if I'd died in prison, or went insane, or worse, if Voldemort had achieved his dream of immortality." He sighed, knowing that this was probably getting too philosophical. "Look, just tell your readers to think about it."

Harry sighed again. "Well, now that you've all discovered my soapbox..." He looked out at the sea of blank faces. "Oh sorry, muggle term, means what makes me go off on long speeches. Anyway..." Suddenly every reporter there was on the receiving end of a toned down death glare. They flinched as one. "I expect to see this incident reported truthfully."

Rita Skeeter, carefully avoiding the lunge that one of the neighboring reporters made to shut her big mouth, yelled out. "Is that a threat, Potter? Or a bribe? Perhaps you... mmph!" This time, the neighbor didn't miss.

Harry just grinned at the sight. "No, that was not a threat, but my future discussions with the press will be based on how honestly you report what happened here and any other incidents that might occur. Suffice it to say that any reporter that lies about me will never get an interview, and on top of that, I might just let it get out that I like or dislike a certain paper..." No one missed the veiled warning. A boycott by Harry Potter could prove disastrous for any paper's circulation. They understood. If they treated Harry with respect, he would do the same for them. For most papers, this would be no problem. For Rita Skeeter... well, that was another issue.

Snape sighed almost wistfully as he watched Harry get exactly what he wanted from the reporters. "He should have been a Slytherin." He muttered under his breath.

Remus wasn't sure who looked more horrified at that, Sirius or Malfoy. Both of their expressions were truly comical. Remus, on the other

hand, having a healthy respect for the usefulness of the Slytherin characteristics, replied, "Maybe, but I'm rather glad he wasn't." A Slytherin Harry might still have killed Voldemort, but possibly only to take his place.

The crowd of reporters took Harry's warning as the end of the conference, and headed frantically out to write their stories. As the hustle and bustle died down, Harry just looked at the remaining people in the room. A large amount of redheads, Hermione, and Dumbledore stared back at him. The silence stretched for a long moment, and then Harry, an inscrutable look on his face, turned his back on them and walked away. He had just discovered that while it is somewhat easy to think about trying to forgive someone while sitting alone at home, it's much, much harder to actually have those thoughts while staring them in the face. He just wasn't ready yet.

However, Ron wasn't about to let his friend just disappear again. "Harry, wait, please!" He dashed forward and grabbed at Harry's arm. Remus and Sirius winced in unison. They had learned from experience that it was much wiser to let Harry choose his own times. Trying to force the matter helped nothing. This couldn't end well.

Sure enough, it didn't. Ten seconds later, Harry resumed his walk out of the building, leaving Ron on the ground nursing his newly broken nose. Remus shrugged to the surprised group as he and Sirius hurried after Harry, leaving Hermione berating Ron. "You idiot, of course he'd going to be angry, especially with you grabbing his elbow like that. Why don't you ever think? Oh, honestly, Ron!"

Ron's response to all this was both obvious and heartfelt. "Ow."

Harry's reaction wasn't all that different, but he was careful to get out of the room before shaking out his hand and cursing. Punching someone hurt. It definitely wasn't as easy as the people in the TV shows Dudley had used to watch made it look. He heard a muffled snort from behind him and he whirled on Sirius. "Think it's funny, do you?"

Sirius did a remarkably good impression of someone watching a freight train come barreling towards him. "Uhh, no! Not at all!" Somehow the wince denied the truthfulness of the statement.

Harry snorted in disbelief and walked onwards, mentally berating himself all of the way. He hadn't really meant to punch Ron, it had just kind of happened. So much for him trying to work past things. Harry knew that he could do it, it was just going to take a little more time. It didn't help that Harry couldn't make himself feel too bad for breaking Ron's nose, he had deserved it. He sighed, this moving on thing was going to be a little harder than he'd thought.

Grumbling once again at the state of his own emotions, Harry apparated all three of them back to the castle, where he proceeded to head straight to bed. He hadn't slept since he'd woken up from his coma, and he was getting groggy with exhaustion. He decided to think about the whole matter in the morning, because he knew that he wasn't up to giving the events of the day the amount of time that was needed to think everything through.

Sirius and Remus stayed downstairs to discuss things. For a long moment, they just looked at each other. Remus was the first to speak. "Well, that was interesting."

"That's an understatement. I hope the Weasley kid's OK."

Remus chuckled. "He's got five brothers, I doubt that it's the first time he's gotten his nose broken."

Sirius ran a hand through his hair. "I swear, Moony, every time I think I have him figured out..."

Remus nodded in full agreement, knowing that he was talking about Harry's amazing ability to surprise everyone on a regular basis. "I know, I know. Then something else happens..."

COMING SOON: The fate of the Firebolt, and a visit to a familiar place.

No cliffhanger here, because I know I've given you a couple of bad ones recently. Anyway, hopefully my Fudge bashing lived up to at least part of your expectations. It was very fun to write. Umm, just a warning, finals are coming up for me, and although I'm still hoping to keep to my once a week update times, it may or may not be possible. I'll try really hard, but my school has to take precedence, at least until I pass Statistics. Also, although it had been a one-time goal of mine to get finished before Christmas, it won't be happening. Too many "long" parts... oh well... =) – krtshadow

## CHAPTER 25

### Melting

It was midmorning before Harry even tried to get out of bed, and, quite frankly, he wouldn't have even attempted it then if it hadn't been for a suspiciously heavy weight on his legs. Mumbling grumpily, he managed to roll over and sit up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as he went. However tired he still was, any thought of further sleep immediately fled his mind as soon as his eyes opened. Sitting on his legs, piercing eyes staring straight at and through him, was a very familiar bird.

"Fawkes?" Harry was surprised. He hadn't seen the beautiful phoenix since before his incarceration. At the thought of what he had missed while locked up in that hellhole, the familiar melancholy feeling washed over him. He'd always liked Fawkes. He wondered if he would have gotten to know the beautiful bird any better if he had been able to stay at Hogwarts where he had belonged.

The phoenix, in that uncanny way that only that type of magical creatures have, sensed Harry's sadness and decided to do something about it. Spreading his flame colored wings, Fawkes lifted his head to the ceiling and let out a burst of song that sent chills up and down Harry's spine. It was haunting and strange to his ears, but somehow it caused all of his regrets to vanish. He closed his eyes and listened for a while, losing track of time as the magical melody of the phoenix soothed his wounded heart.

Finally, the clear tones drifted to a halt and Harry opened his eyes again. "Thank you, Fawkes." He took a deep breath and let it out, feeling revitalized and whole for the first time in a very long while. "What brings you here?"

Fawkes looked wise and flew over to the window. Just inside was a very familiar looking trunk, with a letter stuck onto the lid. He perched on the trunk for a just second, sang another note that made Harry think of a fond farewell, and then flew out the window, speeding away so quickly that by the time that Harry got to the window to look out he was already out of sight. Harry grinned, for once happy with the world.

It wasn't everyday one got phoenix song as an alarm clock. Looking down, he picked up the letter and opened it.

Dear Harry,

I hope this finds you well. I doubt that you are quite in the mood to receive a letter from me, which is understandable, as I was the one who failed you most. Words cannot express my deep sorrow at that fact, but unfortunately, I cannot change the past, no matter how much I wish that I could. I once again apologize. It is all I can do, and I hope that someday you can remember me without hatred. If not, then it is no less than I deserve.

I asked Fawkes to bring you your trunk. Sirius had been keeping it, but obviously didn't have time to collect it before his quick departure with you. Several of your possessions, namely your invisibility cloak and the ingenious little map your father and his friends created, were used in the fight against Voldemort, but it is past time they were returned to their rightful owner. I apologize for keeping them from you, but I admit that I was not aware that they were still in Sirius' old quarters until the rooms were cleaned in preparation for the start of term.

Harry, I realize that you have no reason to listen to me, but please consider a few words of wisdom from someone who has lived for far too long. Do not let your fear of betrayal keep you from living. It may keep you from trusting easily, and that is normal, but I beg you, do not allow my mistakes to ruin your life any more than they already have.

I'll just close with a sincere compliment on your actions and words of yesterday. Both of your parents would have been extremely proud of the wizard that you have become, Harry. Never doubt that.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Harry sighed and refolded the letter. He wasn't quite sure what he thought about the headmaster right now. He shrugged it off and knelt

by his trunk. Folded neatly on top of the miscellaneous paraphernalia was the invisibility cloak. Although he really didn't need it to become invisible anymore, Harry was still very glad to have that one piece of this father back again. With a grin, he swirled it around his shoulders and glanced across the room to the full-length mirror in the corner. Sure enough, the only thing visible was his floating head. He shrugged out of it and carefully placed it in an empty drawer in his desk. Slowly, his room and the whole castle in general was beginning to feel right, as it gathered those little personal touches and memories that make a house, or in this case a castle, feel like a home.

He dug farther down into the mess that was in the inside of his trunk, stopping from time to time to reminisce, and once to gleefully incinerate a very smelly old pair of Uncle Vernon's socks. Finally, he reached to bottom. Sitting back on his heels he looked at the stacks of books, clothes, and odds and ends piled on the floor around him. Something was missing, and Harry had absolutely no idea where it was. But he did know who probably would know.

Wandering into the main hall, Harry got lucky and found Remus and Sirius eating a late breakfast. Harry came to a stop in front of them. Sirius glanced up and sent him a tentative half smile, obviously unsure about Harry's mood. Harry didn't return the smile, but he didn't frown or glare either. "I have a question that I'm hoping that one or the other of you will know." Both men turned all their attention to Harry and waited patiently. He continued. "Where's my Firebolt?"

Sirius paled, glanced at Remus and then slid bonelessly under the table. Harry blinked. That hadn't been quite the reaction that he'd been expecting. Remus looked rather panicked as well. "Sirius!" He hissed. "Get back up here!"

A thump that sounded faintly like a head hitting a wooden table leg was all that came from underneath the table. Remus, meanwhile, was looking suspiciously like it was only his pride that was keeping him from joining his friend. Harry was beginning to feel rather amused, but hid it. It was becoming rapidly obvious to him that something unfortunate had happened to his broom, and that the men in front of it had had something to do with it. He folded his arms and waited,



unknowingly looking rather menacing. Not that he would have done any different had he been aware that he was being intimidating.

Finally, Remus, looking uncharacteristically nervous, spoke up. "Um, I'm afraid it got... broken. I am very sorry."

"Me too." This came from under the table.

Harry blinked. "Broken? Oh. How did that happen?"

Remus began to look trapped. "Um, well..." He trailed off into silence.

Harry waited for a moment, but no explanation seemed to be forthcoming. He sighed. "Fine. Tell me what happened to my broom." That was an order.

Remus slowly raised his eyes to Harry's, looking resigned. "You have to understand... we were very... upset... when we thought that you... well, that you..." He sputtered off into silence.

"Turned into a dark wizard and murdered a whole bunch of people in cold blood?" Harry supplied helpfully. It sounded absolutely stupid when he said it like that. Sirius obviously agreed, because another loud and painful sounding thump sounded from under the table, accompanied by some rather vulgar and self-derogatory muttering.

Remus winced. "Well, yes, and we, well, it was a full moon, and we tore up your broom."

Harry blinked as he deciphered the rather hurried statement. "You tore up my Firebolt." Remus nodded and once again looked as if he was considering the wisdom of putting the thick wooden table between himself and Harry. "You chewed on my broom? MY broom?" Harry took a deep breath. "My broom got ate by a werewolf?" Remus flinched.

At that, Sirius finally emerged from under the table, obviously drawing the line at letting Remus take all the blame for the incident. "It was me, it was my idea, my fault." He was babbling.

Harry just couldn't help it. His upper lip started twitching. For some reason, he was finding this whole situation very funny. It was just too unreal. This type of thing would only happen to him. And Remus and Sirius were just so afraid that he was going to blow up at them. Well, in their defense, he had given them reason to expect that type of behavior from him. They had no way of knowing that he was in the process of softening a little in regards to them. Their ignorance made for an absolutely hilarious encounter, though. He ignored the still babbling Sirius and backed up to lean against the wall. The twitch became a grin, and the grin became a chuckle. Sirius sputtered to a stop and stared as the chuckle became a full-blown roar of laughter. Then he glanced worriedly at Remus, who was also staring in shock at the shaking form of Harry Potter.

After several moments, Harry finally stopped laughing and met the eyes of the two concerned marauders. Stifling another chuckle at the look of mirrored confusion in their eyes, he spoke. "Get your cloaks and be ready. I'm going to Diagon Alley and you two royal idiots just got elected to carry all my packages. Including, now, a new broom." With that, Harry walked away, chuckling and muttering under his breath. "Only me. I swear, only me."

They watched him leave. Then Remus punched Sirius in the arm. Hard. "Just leave me to explain everything, why don't you? Bloody coward!"

Sirius looked apologetic and unobtrusively rubbed his arm. "Sorry, Moony."

"Hmmp. No, you're not." Remus wasn't stupid, and he knew his friend very, very well.

Sure enough, the apologetic look vanished. "True."

Remus looked thoughtful. "He's changed, Padfoot. He's more open."

"I know! He's actually talking to us! And he was laughing! I'm not sure I've even seen him smile yet, and he was laughing!" Sirius grinned wildly, just happy to see Harry acting somewhat normally again. He wasn't deluding himself by thinking that Harry would ever forgive him,

but he was desperately hoping that Harry would be able to put the past behind him and move on. He didn't think that he could bear it if his stupidity cost Harry his happiness. Sirius knew quite well that he had already lost Harry his parents, not to mention his chance for a normal childhood. Knowing that he had doomed him to a life of bitterness and hate as well would be just too much for Sirius to bear.

Remus just sighed and summoned his cloak. Then, as an afterthought, he summoned Sirius' as well, since it didn't look likely that Sirius would remember. He wasn't sure why Harry had made such a turn around, but he liked it and didn't want to risk it by not being ready when Harry was. He just hoped that Harry's good mood would last. In any case, it looked like they would be having another interesting day.

A half an hour later, three cloaked men entered the Leaky Cauldron. Tom, at the bar, hardly even looked up from the newspaper he had his nose buried in. Harry took one look at the six inch headlines proclaiming 'BOY-WHO-LIVED ALIVE!' and 'HARRY POTTER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS; FUDGE FLEES!' and hurried moved on to the alley behind the tavern. He was not in the mood to be gawked at today. Remus and Sirius, still unsure about how to react to Harry's new attitude, followed along obediently about a half a step behind him as he activated the brick wall entryway and moved onto the Diagon Ally.

Harry just stopped for a moment and stared, letting the familiar sights and sounds wash over him. This was the exact place that he'd been standing on when he'd gotten his first glimpse of the wonders of the magical world ten years ago. He remembered quite clearly the awe he had felt as an eleven-year-old seeing something that he'd always longed for. A place to belong, where he wasn't a freak, and where he could be just who and what he wanted to be. Wonders, yes, but he had discovered soon enough that any world had its horrors.

Diagon Ally was crowded, the rush of Hogwarts students and their parents flowing in and out of the stores, while other witches and wizards all seemed to be reading the same newspaper that Tom had been. Harry sighed and pulled his hood a little closer to his face, casting a charm to mask his features just to be sure. He had a funny

feeling that fighting Voldemort again might be easier than getting out of here if everyone figured out that their hero was among them.

The street wasn't exactly the way that he remembered it, it seemed to have been widened, and a circular plaza had been made near the entrance for shoppers to rest and chat. A group of laughing students pushed past Harry as they headed for a nearby bench, and he snapped out of his memories and started shopping in earnest. He first headed to Gringotts, where he found, after a thrilling cart ride, that not only was his former vault in the same condition that it had previously been, but that there was now a new vault added directly to the left of it. It was piled high with gold and was obviously the reparations from the ministry. Harry took as much as he thought he would need and then left, picking up his companions by the door where he had left them.

Harry still found it rather humorous how careful Remus and Sirius were being around him. He was continually getting the feeling that if he yelled 'Boo!' loudly Sirius might just pass out. He was still unsure about what he really felt about them, and the world in general. Was he still furious with them, well, no, but he did still feel betrayed and somewhat lonely. He was following his father's advice and working through his feelings of hurt, but it wasn't easy and it wouldn't be finished overnight. It had only been two days since he had made the decision to try to forgive, and although he was reasonably pleased with his progress so far, he was still far from finished. Just because he hadn't been his normal cold self for the last few days didn't mean that he wasn't feeling the emotions that had caused that type of action from him in the first place. Harry shook off his introspective mood and turned back to his shopping. He had six years worth of stuff to catch up on, and since he certainly wasn't hurting for money, he planned on buying anything that caught his eye. After all, it wasn't like he had to carry anything.

Two hours later, Harry finally headed for Flourish and Blotts, which he planned to make his last stop. Remus and Sirius were now loaded down with packages filled with both everyday and formal robes, potions supplies, a cauldron set, a new owl and all the necessary supplies, a variety of writing supplies, a couple of wizarding landscape pictures that had caught his eye, a supply of floo powder

and an application for hook up, healing supplies, a set of Quidditch balls, and a brand new Cleansweep Ultra, which was the newest and best broom on the market. Harry was quite enjoying himself.

The bookstore was crowded with Hogwarts shoppers, and the three men had to wait just to get into the store. Harry turned and glanced in the window. Then he blinked in surprise and looked again. Sitting on a pedestal was a framed Daily Prophet displaying the headline 'DARK LORD DEAD! HARRY POTTER INNOCENT FREE AND VICTORIOUS!!' and a gold foil stamp that proudly proclaimed 'Collectible Issue, Edition #1'.

Remus noticed his gaze and spoke up. "He won't sell it, and he's had some generous offers, too. I tried myself. He says it's priceless."

Harry allowed a small smile to cross his face. "Good for him. I'm rather partial to it myself, but I think that it would look a little funny if I had one."

Sirius spoke from Harry's other side, looking through his packages. Somehow, Remus had managed to foist off all the bulky and odd shaped ones off on his friend. "I doubt anyone would comment." Harry chuckled softly and entered the shop at last, leaving his two companions to discuss the day so far.

Rows and rows of books lay in piles, on shelves or suspended in midair. Harry moved quickly past the noisy and crowded school book area and towards the dusty shelves in the back. Ten minutes later, he looked up and realized that he had only made his way down half of one shelf and that his arms were full. There had to be a better way. Harry approached the front desk, where several clerks were dealing with a long line of customers. An elderly man seemed to be overseeing things, so Harry approached him. He looked up as Harry neared him and smiled politely. "Hello, can I help you?"

"Yes. I was wondering if you have some type of a mail order system. I need to update my library, and I'll be needing far more than I can carry..."

The elderly man looked excited at the thought of such a large sale. "Ah, yes. Wait for just a moment..." He ducked down and started scrabbling for something under the counter. Finally, he emerged with a large book. "Here we go. When large purchases need to be made, we offer this catalogue. It is magically updated, and shows all the books that we either have in stock or that we can find within a reasonable time. Take it home with you and peruse at your pleasure. Merely tap the picture of the books that you want with your wand and say 'buy'. The volumes will instantly leave our shelves and appear in a holding room. When you have finished your selections, you can pick up the books here or we can ship them to you, for a nominal fee, of course."

Harry pocketed the catalogue, nodded his thanks, purchased his armload of books and left the store. Outside, he found Remus and Sirius and headed back towards the Leaky Cauldron, tired and ready to get home. Shopping was fun, but exhausting, especially when battling crowds like this. Although, tired as he was, he was still going to try out his new broom as soon as he got home. Some things superseded mere exhaustion. Flying was definitely one of those things.

It was as they reentered the plaza in back of the entryway back to the muggle world that Harry noticed something that he had missed on the way in. There was a statue in the center of the paved area.

It was a statue of Harry Potter, in all his triumphant glory. Harry dropped his armload of books and gaped, quite sure that he had never looked that confident and powerful ever, and certainly not immediately after leaving Azkaban. Statue Harry was also holding what appeared to be a wizard's staff and was looking out over the crowded street with an expression that made one think of omnipotence and immeasurable power. To put it quite frankly, the statue looked godlike. Not to mention, quite ridiculous. That, at least, was certainly Harry's opinion.

Harry shook his head slowly, still battling with disbelief. It wasn't everyday you came face to face with a fifteen-foot statue of yourself. He slowly turned to his companions, who were in the process of gathering Harry's dropped books off of the ground. Harry

absentmindedly waved a hand and pocketed the now pebble sized books. "What is this... this..." Harry was at a loss for words.

Remus winced slightly. "Fudge's idea. Arthur Weasley managed to make sure that the one at the Ministry's Hall of Heroes was slightly more... realistic... but Fudge ordered this one himself. Notice the big plaque with his name?" Sure enough, the sign authorizing the placement of the statue there was at least four times as big as it needed to be.

"Oh, of course." Harry shook his head. "Honestly! This is just getting out of hand." He started chuckling softly.

Sirius hazarded a guess, pretty sure what the answer was going to be. "You don't like it?"

Harry sobered and shook his head. "No. They shouldn't remember me when there are so many others that should be..." And then Harry got an idea. Stepping forward, he raised his wand and concentrated.

Sirius, Remus, and most of the population of Diagon Alley watched in shock as the stone began to morph and change. Marble melted like ice, changing the statue into something entirely different. One ministry official moved forward to stop Harry, not knowing who it was that was 'defacing ministry property' but Sirius tripped him with the wrapped end of Harry's new broomstick. Harry worked on, disregarding the slight scuffle and the few cries of outrage from the crowd. No one liked to see anyone destroying their hero's statue, but no one felt like messing with someone who could make stone obey him like that either.

In the center of the plaza, a totally different statue was taking shape. Instead of a standing, triumphant looking man, the stone had shaped into a kneeling figure, huddled at the foot of a tombstone. On the tombstone was a lightly engraved dark mark. Sorrow and pain were evident in the slump of the man's shoulders, but his face was the true work of art. Instead of just a statue that faced one way, Harry seemed to have managed to portray two different meanings with the same statue. From the back of the tavern, to all who entered Diagon Alley there, the back of the slumped man seemed to cry, to mourn at the

loss of a beloved friend or relative. Around the circular base of the statue in flowing script was the words 'NEVER FORGET'.

But it was from the front that the statue truly became what Harry wanted it to be. Facing out and looking over the tombstone was the face of the man, not looking at the tombstone itself, but looking beyond it, towards the street. The face seemed to resonate with sadness and pride, love and longing, but the dominant emotion visible on his stone face was fierce determination. Under that side of the statue, where everyone who exited Diagon Alley would have to see, was the most important message that Harry wanted to impart. 'NEVER AGAIN' was written in bold, almost harsh lettering as if trying to beat its way into the brains of everyone who read it that this tragedy of war and hate must never be allowed to occur again.

Harry stepped back. "There. That's the way that it should be." His words echoed slightly in the perfect silence that had fallen over the street.

The ministry official at Sirius' feet ignored the warning glares that he was getting from Harry's companions and stood to his feet angrily. "Who do you think you are? How dare you change Harry Potter's statue? Turn it back."

Harry shook his head. "No. It was ridiculous anyway." Gasps of astonishment circled the crowd, but Harry heard a few snorts of agreement. "I like this one better." More agreeing sounds. Harry smiled under the hood of his cloak. Perhaps it was just the ministry that was in favor of looking at Harry like he was Merlin himself. Harry could always hope, anyway.

The annoying official yelled again. "Who do you think you are?"

Harry hated to reveal himself, since he was liable to get mobbed, but then again, he wanted the statue to stay this way and not be removed by the ministry, so it was better that they know that he had put it there personally. They wouldn't dare remove it then. Plus, he was done shopping. He backed up to stand between Sirius and Remus. Then, in one swift movement, he pushed back his hood, waited a half of a



second so that everyone could recognize him and then disappeared, taking the marauders with him.

The plaza in Diagon Ally was understandably chaotic for quite some time after that. Hundreds of people came to look and talk about the day's events. But Harry's memorial statue would outlive them all.

COMING SOON: Circumstances dictate a number of different visits to unsuspecting people.

(In other words, krtshadow is not quite sure which of several people Harry will actually be seeing and so is being rather vague to hide that fact...)

Whoosh. I dunno, kind of an odd chapter, really, but it just seemed to fit in, so I went with it. Hopefully, I'll get chapter 26 up before New Years... Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and A Wonderful New Year to everyone!!! May your mistletoe be appropriately placed, your eggnog spiked with what you want it to be spiked with, and your vacation just long enough to get bored in!

(To help me with this chapter of Redemption, I used the map of Diagon Ally found at The Harry Potter Lexicon. I'll put the link up on my author page if anyone is interested in checking it out...)

## CHAPTER 26

### Books

They landed with a thump outside the invisibility shields that surrounded Harry's castle. Sirius promptly dropped all of his packages. "H... er... sir?" His voice was tentative but curious.

Harry was off in his own thoughts. "Hmm?"

"How did you DO that?" Remodeling statues with magic wasn't something that just anyone could do. Sirius was still trying to get used to the fact that Harry obviously had powers that went beyond the normal range of wizarding magic. It wasn't easy equating that with someone who he could still vividly remember throwing handfuls of baby food in his father's face at the age of one.

Harry blinked and then shrugged, seeming almost surprised by the question. "Why, is it supposed to be hard?"

Remus answered emphatically. "Yes. Very hard. Stone is very hard to work with, since there is very little innate magic in it, and marble is the worst of the lot. It takes years of study and a lot of specialized spells, none of which you used." He was also obviously curious as to what type of magic Harry had been utilizing.

Harry actually blushed slightly. "Whoops. Hmm, well, I really don't know how I did it." He shrugged again. "It just comes... I can't explain." Well, technically, he probably could, but it would take hours, and Harry hadn't quite forgiven so much that he felt like easing their minds any. They didn't need to know that he hadn't exactly spent his whole stay in Azkaban in less than horrible conditions, although he figured that they probably suspected that something strange had happened in there. Dementors don't normally teach wandless magic and stone sculpting. He turned his back on the unspoken questions and grabbed his broom from where Sirius had dropped it.

Remus watched as Harry unwrapped his broom and took to the skies as if he had never left them. "Merlin, he is a natural, isn't he?" He shook his head in awe. Harry was currently speeding around the

grounds like a small jet, pushing the brand new broom to its limits, spiraling and looping as if it was the easiest thing in the world.

Sirius picked up the rest of his packages and nodded in agreement. "I just wish that James could see him now."

Remus nodded sadly, still missing his friend after all of those years, but cringing at the thought of what James would say and do if he were here today and knew exactly what two of his closest friends had done to his son. Remus was only sure that it would be both scathing and bloody. Even that didn't stop the werewolf from fiercely wishing that Prongs was there. One never quite got over the death of a friend, and it was moments like these, watching James' son fly, that brought that old muted pain to the surface again.

Meanwhile, Harry was in his element. He had missed flying so much that he felt as if someone had just returned a part of him that had been previously cut off. He thought again, not for the first time, that he should work on the animagus transformation next. It would be fun to fly with his own wings. There was no doubt in his mind that he would have those wings, flying for him had always bordered on instinctual, and it would surely carry over to his animal form. He made a mental note to make sure that some of his new books covered the transformation. He could no doubt order Sirius to teach him, but he wasn't sure that it would work the same way with his magic anyway. That, at least, was the excuse he used to himself for not wanting to force close contact on him and his godfather. In reality, he once again just wasn't ready yet. Not for the kind of close contact that learning the animagus transformation would entail.

He increased his speed once again and felt the wind wring tears from his eyes. An earsplitting grin attached itself to his face as he pulled up sharply, defying gravity for a few moments as he flew straight up towards the afternoon sun. This was freedom. Alone, up here in the sky, with a good broom and miles of empty air. The broom was superb, nearly begging to be pushed to its limits. Harry soon discovered that the braking system also worked well. He pulled to a stop a good 200 feet up in the air and looked far down to the specks that were Sirius and Remus.

Eventually, he was going to have to talk to them. But he wasn't quite ready to either make explanations or verbally forgive quite yet. Doing it mentally was hard enough. And then Harry dove out of the sky, going faster than he had before as gravity worked with the acceleration of the broom to pull him towards the earth. He pulled up only after he had a chance to see the worried look on Sirius' face. He spiraled back up in the air with a whoop, finally forgetting his problems in lieu of the much more enjoyable art of flying.

Harry actually spent most of the daylight hours of the next week or so in the air. It helped him to clear his thoughts, to think about the world, himself, his fears and to deal with the issues that he needed to deal with. If he needed to scream with fury or cry in pain over a particular memory, he could do so in the air and no one was the wiser.

And so Harry was much closer to accepting, if not really understanding, what had been done to him by those that he had once trusted. Another full moon came and went, and time marched on, as it always does. Harry maintained the same amount of contact with Remus and Sirius, staying polite but evasive when he did see them around the castle. To their credit, they seemed to accept that things weren't going to change and didn't push Harry in any way. They were merely there, willing if Harry needed them. If Harry ever noticed the muted longing in Sirius' eyes, or the searching gazes of Remus, he never acknowledged them in any way.

It was as Harry was reentering the castle after a long and invigorating airborne exploration of his castle's grounds that Harry happened to put his hand in his robe's inner pocket and find the shrunken Flourish and Blott's magical catalogue that he had totally forgotten about. Banishing his broom back to his room and magically lighting a nearby lamp, Harry returned the book to normal size and started to thumb through the many pages.

It didn't take Harry very long to realize that he didn't even know what books he currently owned, and was therefore totally unable to order any without guaranteeing himself of a lot of duplicates. With that in mind, he headed for the library, hoping that he could think up a way to use magic to catalogue his many boxes of books. He was surprised when he realized that he hadn't actually been in the library

since the first day that he had toured the castle several months ago. Harry pushed open the heavy door expecting to see the empty shelves and piles of boxes that he remembered. He was pleasantly surprised.

The library looked totally different than he remembered. Books lined the numerous shelves, several small tables were set around here and there, and a fire was blazing in the huge stone fireplace. Harry stood in the doorway and looked around in shock, finally realizing that this must be where his two bondservants had spent most of their time over the last few months. It looked as if a lot of work had been put into making this room a perfect library. He took a step further in.

Remus suddenly came around a corner with an armload of books that seemed to be more than a normal person could carry easily. In the brief seconds before Remus noticed him, Harry studied the man that had been one of his father's closest friends, and a trusted and respected teacher and friend to Harry himself for two years. The gray in his hair was even more pronounced than it had been in Harry's third year, and Harry could almost feel the stress that was still emanating from the ordeal of the full moon only two nights past. Harry wasn't sure that he wanted to know what it was like to know that there was a part of you that liked to kill and worse, that that part was going to be let out in a very painful way once a month for the rest of your life.

Harry was cut off from his musing when Remus looked up, startled at the sight of Harry. The stack of books swayed dangerously, and Harry leapt forward to grab the top half of the stack before they all ended up on the floor. Remus gathered his composure quickly. "Thank you."

Harry shook his head. "No problem, it was my fault anyway. Where do you want these?"

Remus nodded towards the nearest table. "There is fine. I hope you don't mind that I'm using your library? I was just doing a little research."

Harry put the books down next to another small stack of ancient looking tomes and waved Remus' question off. "Someone might as

well get some use out of them. I must say, it really looks nice in here. I guess I haven't been in here since before you arrived." Harry picked a book off of Remus' stack and glanced at the spine. "Inverted Matrices of Divisionary Arithmancy and How to Utilize Them? Merlin, help yourself."

Remus looked almost embarrassed by the depth of his reading material. "I enjoy it. And you do have a wonderful library here."

Harry half sat on the table. "Which brings me to why I'm here." Remus immediately looked attentive. "I was planning on updating the library, but now that I'm here, I don't think that it's such a good idea." Harry almost missed the flash of disappointment in Remus' eyes at the supposed loss of new books. "I want you to do it, if you can spare the time from your research." He handed Remus the catalogue, mentally congratulating himself for such a good idea.

Remus blinked in surprise. "Of course!" He took the catalogue from Harry's outstretched hand and glanced at it appreciatively. "What do you want updated? This library is very complete up until about a thousand years ago, give or take. Pretty much all of the best old books are here. Including these." Remus pulled forward the stack of books that had already been on the table. "These are the most valuable ones that I could find, although I'm not an expert on ancient texts. All of these you could practically name your own price for." Remus handed Harry the top book with careful hands. "And these, look, you have two copies of Most Dangerous Magical Arts and Maladies. Two! And they've been thought lost for centuries, since a library fire destroyed three copies at once."

Harry had to stifle a grin at Remus' animated movements and excited tone of voice. It was obvious now, as it hadn't been to his less discerning eyes in his third year, that Remus had been the bookworm of the Marauders. A rare book excited him like a broom and a Quidditch pitch excited Harry. Harry enjoyed a good book himself, but his devotion to the art of learning didn't quite stretch as far as some peoples did. To each his own, he thought with a mental laugh. Remus was engrossed in the catalogue now, muttering under his breath as he flipped through pages. Glancing at the book in his hand, he flipped to the middle. He read the first paragraph of an article on a type of

freezing charm that he'd never heard of. It looked very interesting, and Harry resolved to learn it as soon as possible. He turned a couple more pages, and then came to a stop on a page that nearly caused him to drop the precious book.

He hurriedly read on to the end of the article, hardly believing what he was reading. Then, trying to keep his face and voice normal, he looked up. Remus was still paging through the catalogue. Harry spoke quietly, wondering if Remus had read what he had just learned from the book. "This looks very interesting, have you read it?"

Remus looked up, startled and then almost embarrassed as he realized that he had totally zoned out for a few minutes. "Oh. No, I haven't. I'd like too sometime, but they were valuable enough that I thought I'd better wait and ask you first."

Harry stood and swept up the four books in his arms, not really caring what the other titles were, but wanting to keep the two Most Dangerous Magical Arts and Maladies away from the werewolf, at least for the time being. "Right then, perhaps when I'm done." Then Harry headed for the door.

Remus called out hurriedly. "Er, what type of books do you want me to order? And how many are you thinking? Are..."

Harry never even slowed down. He called back over his shoulder. "Anything and everything. Bring the whole library up to date." And then he was gone, the only proof of his presence the echoing thud of the library door shutting firmly.

Remus blinked in surprise at Harry's hurried exit. Then a grin spread over his face as he realized the extent of the free rein he had been given over the soon to be updated library. "PADFOOT!"

"Ow, you don't have to yell, I'm right here." Sirius came from around the corner, rubbing his ears.

Remus blinked in surprise. "You were back there all along? Why?"

Sirius shrugged. "He was talking to you. Haven't you noticed? He's more relaxed when it's just you. I didn't want to interrupt." Remus barely caught the flicker of pain flash through Sirius eyes before the animagus changed subjects. "So, you get to spend a bunch of Harry's money, huh?"

Remus knew that Sirius didn't really want to talk about it, so he allowed himself to be diverted. "Yes, I suppose. And you can help, too."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Oh, exactly what I've always wanted." Even though he was mocking his friend, he would help if Remus needed him to, and they both knew it. Plus, it wasn't like there was a whole lot else to do. Sirius had been spending some of his time exploring the castle, but even that was getting a bit old. "I wonder why he went tearing out of here."

Remus shrugged. "Don't look at me to explain Harry Potter. He does what he wants." That was true, but somehow seemed to be an understatement, although Remus couldn't really vocalize how.

Sirius continued to muse softly. "Maybe he saw me..."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous, he sees you all the time and he doesn't run away then." Not to mention that Remus was quite sure that Harry hadn't noticed the other man's presence. If he, a werewolf, hadn't either heard Sirius or caught his scent, there was very little chance that Harry had seen him. Sirius looked somewhat relieved at this reassurance. Remus continued. "What I want to know is whether or not he knows that he took two of the exact same book with him. Rather redundant of him, isn't it? Oh well, he probably just didn't realize it."

Sirius laughed, a small sparkle returning to his eyes. "I thought you weren't going to try to explain him, Moony."

"Oh, right."

Meanwhile, in his bedroom a floor up, Harry was rereading the passage that had so caught his interest in the library. His mind was



filled with questions. Why hadn't this been found or thought of before? Or maybe it had, and it didn't work, which could be why Harry hadn't heard of it before. But with the new developments of the last decade or so, well, that could change everything. And on top of it all, how was he going to find out whether or not it would work? Who could tell him if it was even possible? He certainly didn't have the knowledge necessary to figure it out.

And then he grinned and disappeared, wandlessly taking a few useful items with him. Those items included one copy of Most Dangerous Magical Arts and Maladies and the Marauder's Map. He had just thought of the perfect person to ask.

COMING SOON: A visit to Hogwarts.

And the plot thickens for the last time... or not, you know me, this story may just last forever. Actually, we are winding down a little, I think I would estimate six or seven more chapters. Er, maybe things aren't winding down quite yet. Anyway, thanks for reading, double thanks for the reviews, and I'll get the next chapter up as soon as I can. -krtshadow

Question: What color are Sirius' eyes? Does it say? I know I already messed up James' once, saying dark brown when they should be hazel, so I just thought I'd ask and see if anyone can clue me in...

## CHAPTER 27

### Hogwarts

Harry considered the facts as he walked up from the edge of Hogwarts apparation wards into the castle itself. And fascinating facts they were. Most Dangerous Magical Arts and Maladies seemed to have a cure for lycanthropy hidden in its pages. Unfortunately for a millennium of cursed werewolves, the cure had been tested and proven unusable. Not because it didn't work, for it did, but because it was impossible to administer. The problem was that the vile potion had to be consumed in the light of the full moon and from a silver bowl. In other words, while the patient was furry, insane, and bloodthirsty. Harry had grimaced when he had read the accounts of the few tests that the creator of the potion had tried. Forcing a werewolf to do anything would be hard enough, but drink a potion that likely smelled of strange, if not downright disgusting, potions supplies? From a bowl that burned them badly if their noses so much as touched it? Impossible. They had even tried to force feed one, and although that man had been cured of his curse in the end, he had killed several assistants and badly wounded others in the process. And so, the creator of the potion had left it and moved on to more profitable sciences, leaving the record of the useless potion only in a book, of which only a few copies were made, and all of which were assumed to be lost only a few years after.

But that had all been centuries before the recent creation of the Wolfsbane potion, which allowed a werewolf to keep his mind. And with that mind, the ability to know that something horrible smelling can be helpful, and that silver doesn't burn as long as one is careful not to touch it. Harry knew that it was quite possible that something in one of the potions could react badly with something in the other, resulting in death or a condition worse than lycanthropy, but he had to try. For Remus, who, along with Sirius, Harry was coming very close to forgiving, and for every other person who suffered under the curse.

Once in the castle, Harry walked straight to Snape's office. It was the middle of the hour, and although Harry hadn't planned it that way, it did make it so that Harry was relatively unnoticed as he walked through the halls to the dungeons. Relatively unnoticed because of

the portraits and a rather nervous Peeves, who obviously still remembered their last encounter and stayed out of Harry's way. Opening the door to the gloomy office, Harry decided that the décor fit Snape's personality perfectly. It was dark and everything had sharp edges. But it wasn't ugly or sinister, merely formal. Harry particularly admired the statuette of a coiled snake made of the darkest marble that sat on the corner of Snape's otherwise bare desk. He sat down to wait. It couldn't be too long before whatever class Snape was currently terrorizing would let out.

Sure enough, only fifteen minutes or so passed before Snape entered. The potions master froze for a split second at the sight of his visitor and then shut the door behind him firmly. Setting his load of books down on a nearby shelf, Snape sat down behind his desk and looked questioningly at Harry. "I assume this isn't a social call, Potter, what is it?"

Harry grinned slightly. "No, not social, sorry. I have a few questions for you if you have a few moments. I can wait if you have another class?" Harry raised a questioning eyebrow.

Snape shook his head slightly. "Not for over an hour, so now is good." He narrowed his eyes. "Come for some poison for your two slaves?"

Harry figured that this must be Snape's idea of a joke and allowed himself a faint and sardonic smile. "No, not really. I need to know, honestly, who is the best potions master around right now."

Snape sat back, looking faintly surprised at this question. "Well..." He gave it a little thought. "Honestly..." Harry was probably the last person in a decade or two that saw Severus Snape even slightly embarrassed. "... me, probably. Andisa Maine, in the States, might be as good. It would depend on what you need. There are specialists for nearly everything." He couldn't hold back the curiosity in his voice.

Harry looked somewhat amused. "I thought it might be you. As for what I need, well, I've discovered something that had previously been... lost... and I'd like your professional opinion on it. I think that you will figure out where I'm headed." He handed the book over open

to the correct page. Snape took a second to blink in disbelief at the title and then carefully glanced at the open page. Harry knew the instant that the possibilities sunk in. Snape's jaw dropped and he turned the page to look at the recipe list. Then, reluctantly, he handed the book back to Harry. Harry met his eyes. "What I need to know is if this potion can be combined or taken with the Wolfsbane potion. I think you can see that if it could..." Harry let his voice trail off, not needing to name the possibilities.

Snape shook his head in wonder. "An easy cure for lycanthropy. Merlin." He let out a long breath and shook his head slightly in disbelief. "Maybe. I don't see any immediate problems, but I'll need to run a full theoretical model on both of the potions. The only potential problem would be the timing, and possibly the crushed amins shell. But if we could cut..." Snape seemed to be quite in his element.

Harry held up a hand. "Please. I bow to your knowledge. Potions is one thing that I am absolutely dismal in."

Snape sneered. "Yes, I know."

Harry mused softly. "Hmm, must have been the teacher..." Then, before Snape could add anymore acerbic comments, Harry handed the book back over. "Interested in figuring this out?"

Snape's eyes were alight with anticipation. "Yes." Then his eyes met Harry's, searching for something. "Are you supplying the first user?"

Harry met his gaze coldly. "Only if you are sure." He emphasized the last word.

Snape nodded, correctly gathering that it would definitely not be in his best interest to allow Remus Lupin to be harmed in the very process of curing him. He got the distinct feeling that his professional pride would not be the only thing painfully damaged by such a mistake. He was Slytherin enough to recognize a veiled threat when he heard one. And after seeing what Harry was capable of when was angry, well, he would be very sure. "Regardless of rumor, Potter, my grudges do not extend to matters of my profession."

Harry looked skeptical and mocked loudly. "Riiiiight. Potter! Thirty points from Gryffindor for breathing! And detention for having the nerve to exist!"

Snape glared. "You're the exception, not the norm." He did have the grace to look faintly embarrassed though. If one looked very closely, that is.

Harry suppressed a laugh and sighed theatrically. "No, never that." He wasn't sure that he'd ever been normal and it didn't look as if that would be changing anytime soon.

The potions master changed the subject with yet another glare. "Shall I copy off the pages?"

Harry stood and shook his head. "Just put it in the library when you are done. Just be careful, don't let Madam Pince faint or anything. I suppose that it is only fair, anyway, I'm afraid that that book on bonds that you sent me got a little..." Harry arched an eyebrow sardonically, and sarcasm dripped from his voice. "...battered." Harry left the room before Snape could fully adjust to the fact that not only had he just had a reasonably pleasant conversation with the Boy-Who-Lived, but that the aforementioned had also left a downright priceless book in his care. Snape didn't worry about it long, but spent the last few moments of his break with his rather long nose firmly stuck in the book, which carried far more than just a possible cure for lycanthropy. Potter hadn't said that he couldn't look at the rest of the book.

Leaving Snape's office, Harry hid his face again and headed back towards the Great Hall and the door to the outside. Walking through the walls of Hogwarts again brought back hundreds of memories, most of them good. He fingered the map inside his pocket. He hadn't even gotten lost. Obviously the skill of maneuvering around Hogwarts was something that never quite left you. It also helped when there really wasn't anything a professor or Filch could do to him if they found him somewhere he shouldn't be.

Suddenly he stopped walking as a sound from a nearby hallway caught his attention. And then he grinned. It seemed as if a new generation of pranksters had come to Hogwarts. Whispering quietly,

two boys, probably third or fourth years, emerged from the nearest corridor. The taller of the two chuckled merrily while tucking a small bag back into his robes. "Nick, that'll go off perfectly. If you managed to set the timer right that is..." Then he trailed off suddenly as his slightly more observant friend elbowed him sharply, eyes locked on the cloaked Harry. "Uh oh..."

"Up to no good, boys?" Harry seriously felt like laughing at the twin looks of horror that they were shooting at him. It made him wonder if he had ever really looked this guilty when caught somewhere he shouldn't be. He probably had, he mused to himself, children, and he was no exception, were quite good at displaying their every thought right out on their face for all to see.

"Erm..." Nick looked trapped.

Harry smiled, even though he knew that they couldn't see it under his hood. "No fear. I can't punish you and wouldn't anyway. You might not want to advertise your plans quite so loudly, though."

They exchanged shocked glances. Then the first spoke up again. "Um, yes, sir."

Harry then got an idea. A very, very good idea. One that he felt quite sure his father, with his prankster heart, would have greatly approved of. "Actually, boys, I think I'll help you out." He motioned them closer. They approached, tentative, but curious. "You seem to be worthy pranksters, but you'll never reach truly legendary proportions without a little... aid." Harry pulled the map from his pocket. As he did so, he wandlessly duplicated the parchment, making an identical copy, which he showed the boys as he kept the original. He was mentally grateful for the extra magical powers he possessed, since copying the map in a normal fashion would have taken weeks of carefully redoing spells and infusing magical properties to the new map. His way was so much simpler, if somewhat tiring, and left him able to keep an important part of his father's childhood while returning a Marauder's Map to the only real place that it had any use.

Nick's friend looked highly skeptical. "It's just a blank piece of old parchment."

Harry shook his head slowly. "Yes, you would think so, wouldn't you? But it's not. Here..." And he pulled his wand and muttered just loud enough so they could hear him. "I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good."

The spidery lines of the map twisted their way outwards to the edge of the parchment. Harry let them get a bare glimpse and then continued. "To close it, just say 'Mischief managed.'" Obediently, the map became a mere slip of old and yellowed parchment again. He glanced up at the now covetous boys and grinned at the looks of glee that they were shooting each other. Clearly they had a couple of good ideas that would be greatly facilitated by the use of this map. "So, I suppose you two could put this to good use?"

Nick nodded hurriedly. "Yes, of course we do, but we haven't got much money, sir, I don't think..."

Harry interrupted. "No money, but a few rules." They nodded and listened attentively. "Nothing harmful. I know that pranks and rivalries are fun, but do not intentionally hurt anyone else. Second, this can be a valuable resource if Hogwarts is ever in danger. If it is, it is up to you to take this to the headmaster. Lastly, it stays at Hogwarts. You can use it while you are here, but when you graduate, pass it on, along with the rules, to some likely candidate." Both of the boys nodded solemnly. Harry handed the map over. "I'd wait until tonight to use it or you might be late..."

Nick glanced at his watch and went pale. "We already are. C'mon, Granger is going to kill us." The boys bolted down the hallway.

Harry followed, intrigued by the thought of Hermione teaching. As he walked down the hall and around the corner, Harry saw them dart into an open door and heard a familiar voice. "Mr. Andrews, Mr. Reece, you are nearly fifteen minutes late. Det..."

Harry decided that it wasn't really fair that the two pranksters got a detention for his detainment of them, since it was likely that they got plenty of detention time that they did deserve. So he poked his head

into the classroom and looked at Hermione somewhat sheepishly. "Actually, they were helping me, Hermione. Sorry." He turned to leave.

Hermione dropped both her stern demeanor and her textbook and gasped. "Harry?" And then she bolted out the door, leaving her class behind. All the students knew who Professor Granger had once been a best friend of, as it was no secret. Murmurs and excited whispers filled the room and two stunned boys exchanged wide-eyed glances with each other.

Meanwhile, Hermione dashed down the hall after Harry. "Harry? Harry, wait, please!" She didn't really expect him to stop, but she had to try. "Harry?"

Up ahead, Harry sighed, stopped, and turned slightly. He should have known that she would do this. Actually, out of both of his former friends, he'd much rather talk to Hermione. Ron just made him instantly angry, for reasons that he couldn't quite fathom.

Hermione stopped in front of him, indecision lining her face. "Harry, please, can we talk?" She held her breath and waited for his answer.

Her face fell as he turned and walked away. But, to her surprise, he stopped at the doorway of an empty classroom and opened the door. She followed him in, hope blossoming. He sighed and sat on the edge of the desk. "I can't promise anything."

She nodded. "I know, I mean, I wouldn't expect you... Oh, Harry!" Biting her lip, she looked at the floor. "I've planned this conversation out at least twenty times, but it's all gone now."

Harry's eyes were unreadable. "I can remember a few things that I wanted to say to you as well, but they are probably better left unsaid."

Hermione swallowed hard, correctly imagining several of those things. "Harry, I want you to know that I am very sorry. I... you'd never given us any reason, and I just... it just made sense, but it shouldn't have, it didn't, but I thought it did, and I... I..." She bit her lip, trying desperately to hold back the tears that were threatening to spill. "I'm



really sorry." Then she waited, shoulders bowed, for Harry to comment.

Harry thought of a great lot of scathing, hurtful things that he could say, any of which could have reduced Hermione to tears in an instant. But somehow, this didn't seem to appeal to him as much as it would have a month or two ago. He sighed. "I don't like what happened, but I understand. You were fourteen, and every adult that you looked up to and respected was telling you something that they honestly thought was right."

Hermione shook her head violently. "No! I should have known, I should have realized that something was wrong."

Harry stood and walked to the closest window. He looked out over the grounds, cloaked in autumn beauty. He mused softly, putting words to something that he'd been struggling with ever since he'd first began to deal with his emotions rather than hide from them. "Maybe it was for the best, anyway. Voldemort's gone, the world isn't in shambles, and..."

Hermione gasped and moved forward, her hand reaching out to grab at his arm before she realized what she was about to do and pulled it back. "Don't say that! Yes, it worked out, but that, that doesn't make it right!" Harry turned back towards her, a skeptical look on his face. Hermione rushed, desperate to make him understand. "What happened to you was wrong, and wrong never makes right. It never should have happened. It isn't your responsibility or your lot in life to suffer. You have just as much right to be happy as anyone else. We... we took your freedom for something you didn't do, and that's an inexcusable crime on our parts. Even if it did turn out all right in the end, don't you ever think that it was OK!"

Harry just watched as Hermione spoke, sensing the passion for her words in her voice and the pleading look in her eyes. She reminded him so much of the Hermione he remembered, but she was different too, and Harry was forcibly reminded that it had been six years since they had spoken like this, and ten years since they had first met. But even though she had changed, he couldn't doubt what she said. She truly believed what she was saying, and the words made sense to

Harry. He shrugged. "Well, it's done now, and can't be changed. I don't know if I believe in destiny or anything, but it did end up the way that everyone thought it would."

Hermione looked down to the ground. "No, it didn't. Because I always thought that you would be facing Voldemort, but that Ron and I would be by your side. And then Sirius came along, and I figured he'd be the one at your back." Her voice shook. "But we messed it all up and it was just you. Alone." A tear trickled down her cheek and she scrubbed at it furiously.

Harry took a step forward and just barely touched her arm with his fingertips. "I won't lie and say that I didn't hate... well, everyone... for a long time." She winced. Harry continued. "I'm getting over it." Hermione looked up, a glimmer of hope shining in her eyes. "Slowly."

She nodded, understanding both what he was and wasn't saying. He was getting there, but he wasn't there yet. "Ron and I, we'll wait forever if it takes that long. We are both truly sorry, Harry."

"Yes, I know." Harry turned to leave. As he walked out the door, leaving Hermione behind, one final comment floated back. "Tell Ron he's a prat..."

A shaky smile broke out over Hermione's face and she closed her eyes in happiness. She was willing, but maybe they wouldn't have to wait forever after all. And then her eyes flew open again as she remembered. "Oh no, my class..."

COMING SOON: Another full moon, and Snape visits the castle.

Well, I doubt that I surprised anyone, but I really wasn't trying to leave a cliffhanger last time. Maybe it seemed more obvious to me than it was to you... that happens sometimes... Thanks SOO much for the reviews, I don't even mind if you have nothing to say, it's just nice to know that people are reading and liking my brainchild! –krtshadow

## CHAPTER 28

### Healing

Two weeks past before anything interesting happened in Harry's life. He still flew every day, seemingly unbothered by the increase in cold weather as autumn set in. Remus ordered more books than Harry thought that he could ever read, and put Sirius in charge of getting them all from the crates that they were delivered in to the shelves. Harry calmly paid the bill, ignoring Remus' nervousness about the massive amount of money he'd spent. Harry didn't worry about it. It didn't even make a dent in the reparation money that the ministry had paid him.

It was one morning at the usual mail time that something quite out of the ordinary happened. Harry was just enjoying his toast and reading the Daily Prophet when a commotion at the door caused him to look up with concern. A rolling ball of feathers and small elf tumbled through the door and a voice could be heard yelling shrilly. "Bad owl! Bad owl! No! Not go to Master Harry! Stop!" But the owl pulled away and flapped towards Harry, whose jaw dropped as he recognized the blur of white.

The white bird, feathers somewhat out of place after her struggle with Rully, swooped down to flap wildly around Harry's head. "Hedwig!" The bird finally came to rest on Harry's shoulders, hooting softly and butting her head up against Harry's ear.

Sirius watched as a grin nearly tore his godson's face in half. His heart broke at the fact that seeing a look of joy on Harry's face was unusual. Not for the first time, he cursed himself and bleakly thought of the good times that they could have had together if only he hadn't been such a royal idiot. He should have been there for Harry. That was just all there was to it. He should have been there, and if he had been smart enough, loyal enough, it all would have been different. Sirius looked down, biting at the inside of his lip. He should have just stayed away from the Potter family entirely, starting with James. It seemed as if he couldn't cause them anything but pain.

Remus noticed his friend's sudden melancholy mood and stifled a sigh. He wished that there were something he could do to help Sirius, but he couldn't think of anything that didn't require some extremely illegal time travel and the risk of making things much worse. Sirius was firmly holding himself completely responsible for something that so many different people shared the blame for. But every time Remus tried to cheer him up, Sirius only got gloomier, so he'd given up trying to talk his friend out of his moods. Being the more logical of the two, Remus accepted his portion of the blame, but placed most of it on Voldemort. He had been malicious, they had just been stupid. Which didn't excuse it, by any means, but Remus at least had the small relief of knowing that they had never intended another innocent man to be imprisoned in that hellhole called Azkaban.

Harry, meanwhile, was scratching Hedwig's head and nearly bursting with happiness. It was so good to have her back. Then he glanced up and noticed Rully standing nearby, looking very sad. As soon as the small elf noticed Harry's eyes on him, he began to babble wildly. "Rully so sorry, Master Harry! Owl wouldn't stop! Wouldn't give Rully letter to take to Master Harry! Rully try..."

Harry interrupted before the apology got too out of control. "Rully, don't worry about it. This owl belongs to me and we hadn't seen each other for a very long time. She's always allowed to come straight to me, OK?"

Rully looked relieved. "Yes, Master Harry." The elf retreated and returned to the owl room.

Harry turned to Hedwig. "Where have you been?" Then he noticed the letter attached to her leg. Pulling it gently free, he unfolded it curiously, not recognizing the neat handwriting. The date was nearly a week ago.

Dear Mr. Harry Potter,

I don't know whether or not you remember me, but I did have the pleasure of meeting you once. You knew me as Madam Maxime, the headmistress from Beauxbatons, but my given name is Olympe. I

hardly know where to start, but perhaps the beginning would be the best.

After your unfortunate incarceration, your owl, Hedwig, was given into the care of Hagrid, who is now my husband of three years. I am writing this letter instead of him because, quite frankly, he's inconsolable at the thought of what happened to you and probably couldn't hold a pen straight to save his very life. I have to admit that if I didn't love him quite as much as I do, I would have kicked him out into the forest by now, because his howling is beginning to grate upon my nerves. But then again, I doubt very much if I would be in any better condition if one of my pupils had been in the same circumstance, especially a student with which I was a close friend. Please be assured that he is very happy to hear the news of your innocence and freedom, and very saddened to think of any part he may have played in your dreadful ordeal.

I know that you are probably questioning the timing of this letter, for unless you have asked someone, it is unlikely that you know that we have only just received notice of the events surrounding your release and subsequent defeat of He-Who-We-Are-All-Glad-Is-Dead. For Hagrid, and in my own right, I thank you for releasing our world from that terror. The debt that society owes you for that alone is irredeemable. However, I digress. Three years ago, just after our marriage, in fact, the Ministry discovered proof of both of our, to put it delicately, questionable heritage. I speak, of course of the fact that both of us have giant blood. The French Ministry managed to get me fired from Beauxbatons, and banned from a further post in that country. Professor Dumbledore offered me a position at Hogwarts, but Hagrid and I both knew that with the racial tensions already high because of the war, neither of us would be able to do much good there.

We are now in South America, working together on a small little school in Argentina. It is very small, but with the two of us and a few local teachers, we are doing well. They had needed a wizarding institution here badly, for many children with magic were going quite untrained, or, at very best, had to attend a school in the United States, which made for an extreme culture shock. And Hagrid is quite

enjoying the wildlife. Alas, I digress again. It is a fault of mine, you see.

However, our remote location does put us a bit behind on the news. Hagrid had been quite worried about Hedwig, seeing as she grew increasingly restless over the last few months. After finally hearing of the welcome news, her agitation made perfect sense. She could sense you again after so many years of being blocked by the wards of Azkaban. We immediately set out to write you a letter and return your owl back where she belongs. I normally wouldn't send an owl on such a long journey, but Hagrid assures me that Hedwig's magic is strong. Truly, I'm not sure we could even keep her here much longer, she seems as if she wants to be back with you very badly.

Dear me, this letter's length got a bit beyond what I had in mind. I will leave you with Hagrid's repeated apologies, to which I will add mine as well. If you ever find yourself in the area, you would be most welcome to stop and stay with us as long as you desire. However, be warned, you might find yourself teaching a class or three. I know that if it was at all possible Hagrid would return to England with the express intention of seeing you, but with the school as new and shorthanded as it is, it just is not possible as of yet.

May you find the happiness so long denied you.

Madam Olympe Maxime, Headmistress, Rathriver, School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

I'M AWFULLY SORRY, HARRY. HOPE YOU'RE ALL RIGHT NOW. -  
HAGRID

"Well." Harry blinked in surprise as he tried to assimilate all of the information that it had dumped into his mind. "No wonder you look tired, girl. Ready for some rest?" Hedwig did look exhausted, but she also didn't look as if she wanted to leave her master's side. Harry rose from his seat, careful not to jostle Hedwig from his shoulder, and walked slowly towards the owl room to leave the tired owl in the care of Rully, who would see that she got a good meal and a warm place to sleep.

However, it was another week or so before Harry got the letter he'd been waiting for. The letter was unusually brief, and the handwriting was somewhat shakier than normal, but Harry was just glad to get word from Snape at all. He felt a smile spread over his features as he read the words.

Potter,

It works. Finally. I'll send Wolfsbane as usual. Will need to be there to administer cure. Where the bloody world are you anyway? Owl coordinates or send portkey. Not right now, though, I haven't slept in four days. Will kill any owl that wakes me before noon.

Snape.

Harry felt a flash of sympathy for the students of Hogwarts. The last few weeks must have been very interesting for them. Normal Snape was bad enough, but a sleep deprived Snape? That could inspire especially nasty nightmares. He would send a portkey over, but he would wait until he was sure he wasn't sending either Hedwig, or his new owl, Mercury, into a danger zone.

So it was that Harry walked out past the wards near dusk the next evening and waited for the arrival of Snape to his not so humble abode. Right on time, the letter Harry had sent earlier that day did its secondary duty as portkey, and the potions master appeared, sneer in place already. "So, Potter, you live up a tree. How... fitting."

Harry rolled his eyes and worried slightly that his understanding Snape's rather twisted sense of humor didn't bode well for his sanity in general. He led Snape through the wards and stopped to sneer himself. "Not exactly a tree, but it suffices."

Snape tilted his chin upwards and stared at the looming castle. "You... you didn't build this, did you?"

Harry shook his head and began walking towards the main entrance. "No. I just found out where it was."

"Then... where did you find that piece of information?" Snape followed, still fighting with both his amazement and his curiosity.

Harry shrugged slightly. "Oh, the same place I learned how to do this." He waved his hand smoothly and the heavy door opened soundlessly in front of them.

Snape didn't push for any more answers, correctly judging that Harry didn't want to answer that type of question. Once inside, Harry led the way to his study. Snape commented as he stood by the fire. "Frankly, I really don't remember what I wrote in that letter I sent you, but I gather I included that the potions will work together?"

Harry nodded and poured Snape a shot of Draco Malfoy's birthday gift. "Yes, I gathered that. Dare I even ask how many points Gryffindor has lost over the last few weeks?"

Snape smirked evilly. "Many." He took the glass and tasted the whiskey gingerly. Then his eyes widened with appreciation. "Very nice."

"Thanks, Malfoy gave it to me, for my birthday, no less."

Snape nearly choked. "Draco gave you this?" He looked at his glass in concern. "It's likely poisoned."

Harry shook his head. "Don't worry, I tested it thoroughly."

Snape raised an eyebrow sardonically. "Yes, I imagine you did. You won't have any?"

Harry shook his head again, looking faintly green. "No, I've had some already."

Snape looked puzzled for a moment and then comprehension dawned. "How much, Potter?"

Harry held up the bottle to the light. There was only about a quarter of the bottle left. "Oh, whatever isn't in your glass..." Snape blinked and then, surprisingly, chuckled, a friendly, if somewhat rusty, sound.



Harry adopted a somewhat sheepish look. "It really wasn't very funny at the time, as I believe Sirius can attest to." Snape laughed outright at that.

He took another swallow of his drink and looked at Harry questioningly. "Why are you doing this, Potter?" The serious tone in his voice made it clear what he was talking about. Snape couldn't figure out why Harry was bothering to help someone who he had perfectly good reasons to hate.

Harry knew exactly what Snape was asking. He thought for a moment. "There's always more than one reason. But I think that the biggest is that if I didn't, I'm not sure if I'd like what that would make me." Snape looked puzzled, and Harry tried to clarify, searching for words to make his meaning clear. Finally he settled on the blunt approach. "I have a lot of power, Professor. I can't afford to keep my hate." He didn't want to keep his hate.

Snape understood. "Or you risk becoming dark yourself." Harry winced, but nodded, knowing that it was true. Snape looked at Harry for a long moment, seeming to be debating something with himself. When he did speak, he seemed to change the subject completely. "Did you know that the head interrogator during the time that you were arrested was actually death eater? Never marked or anything, but definitely a supporter."

Harry's voice turned cold. "I was never interrogated."

Snape nodded, not seeming surprised in the slightest. "We, the order that is, wondered about that afterwards, once we knew what had really happened. We didn't really know if he had just changed the interrogation report or just made it up entirely."

Harry pondered that for a moment, wondering for an instant what the report had said that he'd confessed to, and then decided that he'd really rather not know. Harry swore silently. "Tom thought of everything, didn't he?" That was the real reason that he was able to even think of forgiving his friends and surrogate family. If they had done it on purpose... but they hadn't. They should have questioned him themselves and not put faith in a ministry that had already failed

them, but that was a mistake, not a plot. Harry put the blame squarely where it was due. Voldemort was at fault, and Voldemort was dead. Fitting.

"Except for the fact that you just don't know when to give up and die." Snape blinked, seemed to realize that his statement could be taken as a compliment, and changed the subject. "Well, it's nearly time. The moon has been up for nearly ten minutes."

Harry nodded and led the way to the dungeons. Snape winced at the unlikely harmony of howls that wafted its way up the stairway. Harry was reminded that the potions master did not have happy memories of Remus as a werewolf. And then he wondered why Snape was doing this, but before he could form the question, they had reached the reinforced cell that currently held a very large black dog and an even larger werewolf.

The noise stopped suddenly as both wolf and dog became aware of the newcomers. Moony, while hardly tame, was in control of his mind, and just sat and watched them curiously. Padfoot was a little less trusting and moved in between the bars and his friend, faintly growling and obviously wondering why the two men were invading Remus' privacy. He became Sirius as Harry unlocked the door. "What's going on?" He both looked and sounded concerned.

Snape sneered in his face. "Oh, don't worry, Black, this won't take long..." His tone was hardly comforting.

Harry broke in before the two rivals could attack each other verbally or physically. "Both of you, back off." He was almost amused at how quickly he was obeyed. Maybe he was overdoing the powerful wizard with a bad temper bit.

Snape pulled a dark vial out of his sleeve and poured the liquid into a silver bowl that he brought from an obviously charmed pocket. He added one pinch of some type of dusty substance and then stepped back. Harry grimaced, distinctly glad that it wasn't him that had to drink the ugly potion. As he watched, a large bubble slowly came to the surface and popped, letting off a decidedly foul smell. Snape

moved it in front of the still calm werewolf and spoke quietly. "Just drink it, Lupin."

Sirius started forward, but Harry placed a firm hand on his chest and pushed him back. It wouldn't have been enough to stop Sirius from actually moving past Harry if the older man had wanted to, but it surprised him so much that he just jerked to a stop, not understanding the situation or why Harry was actually willingly touching him. "W-what's going on?" But Harry didn't answer.

Moony, still capable of using Remus' logic even while trapped in his lupine form, just looked over at Harry, who nodded. He drank, whimpering only once as the tip of his nose brushed against the silver bowl for a split second. Then he raised his head and sat back, looking at the other occupants of the cell in obvious confusion. Silence reigned as nothing happened for a long moment. And then Moony sneezed.

Everyone blinked slightly at the somewhat unusual sight of a werewolf in a sneezing fit. Then Moony howled once, painfully, and suddenly became Remus. Harry watched as the silver burn on his nose, at first painfully red, slowly faded. Remus just stared at Harry, moonlight washing over his back, a look of hope on his face. "Harry?" He was gasping slightly, as if trying to catch his breath after running hard. "What was that?"

Harry noticed immediately that Remus had been able to use his name painlessly. He checked the bond connection as he answered briefly. "A cure." Sure enough, the thread of power connecting them was now so thin that a first year student could probably have broken it.

Remus looked absolutely stunned. He slowly reached out and with one trembling finger, touched the empty silver bowl in front of him. He recoiled slightly, as if expecting pain, but when none came, he reached out again and held the bowl in his hands, looking as if someone has just struck him in the face with something very heavy. An emotion that could only be described as awe manifested itself in his eyes. Sirius pushed past Harry to kneel beside his friend, sputtering with joy and pulling the former werewolf into a hug.

Harry watched them celebrate as he also watched the last traces of the bond dissolve before his eyes. He snapped out of it as Snape headed for the door, obviously pleased with himself about the success of the potion. Harry followed, and wordlessly escorted the potions master to the edge of the wards again. "Hogwarts is in apparation range, that way." Harry pointed.

Snape nodded, but paused before disappearing. "Let me know if he has any strange reactions, but I'd stake my reputation he won't."

Harry nodded. "Thanks, Professor."

Snape shook his head. "This is going to make me a very famous wizard, Potter." He looked as if he wanted to say something else, but obviously decided against it and disappeared.

Harry turned and faced the castle for a long moment, enjoying the sight of the grounds and towers shrouded in moonlight. Then he heaved a sigh and headed back indoors. Remus and Sirius would have calmed down by now, and would want answers. They would get them.

It was time to get this over with.

COMING SOON: Confrontation time...

Whew... that got longer than I planned, but there was just nowhere to break it up at. Obviously, I'm making assumptions as to the range of apparation, the fact that silver burns werewolves only if it touches them, (not just by being near it), owl magic, and Madam Maxime in general.

Thank you so much for the reviews, opinions and ideas. I may not always use the ideas or necessarily like the opinions, but I LOVE to read the reviews. It's a real rush and I appreciate you all for making my writing experience more fun. —krtshadow

## CHAPTER 29

### Dissolution

Harry settled in a comfy chair in his study, a book in his hands and feet outstretched towards the crackling fire. Unlike many of the educational books that he'd been studying since his release, this was merely a muggle fantasy novel. Harry found that while many of the muggle authors had a very warped idea of what magic was, they overcame their lack of accurate knowledge with fascinating ideas and deep plots. Not that he was really appreciating either to the fullest extent at the moment. He was more just trying to pass the time, waiting for the inevitable. They would come, and for once, Harry actually felt himself prepared to face their questions. To face them.

He both wanted this conversation to happen, wished it wouldn't, and couldn't wait for it to be over. But some things had to be said. A small smile quirked at the edge of his lips. For the first time in quite a while, if ever, he felt in control, not of the situation, because, quite frankly, he was often in control of that. He felt in control of himself. He felt as if life was going to work out. It wasn't something that he was all that familiar with. It felt good.

Sure enough, it wasn't very long before a tentative knock sounded at the door. Harry waved a hand in the general direction of the door and heard it open. Putting the book down, he glanced over. Both Remus and Sirius stood in the doorway.

Remus looked happy. It was one of those situations where no one would have ever realized that the weight of the curse he carried effected him physically until one saw him after it was lifted. There was a light in his eyes that Harry had never seen before, and he looked younger and more alive. He was also very confused. Sirius looked no better, with rampant confusion battling with happiness for his best friend in his eyes.

Harry gave up his searching stare. "Well, don't just stand there. Come in."

They moved cautiously into the room, both men sensing that something was about to happen. Remus was the first to find his voice. "H-how?" He couldn't seem to even say the words, but his meaning was clear.

Harry took pity on his baffled tone and explained briefly. "That book you showed me had a potion in it that Snape adapted to be used with the Wolfsbane potion. It worked without it, but it killed more than it cured, since the werewolf had to drink it during the full moon."

Remus winced and nodded, understanding exactly what Harry was implying. "Thank you, Harry. I can't ever..." He trailed off, shock sweeping over his face. "Harry? Harry?"

Sirius muttered out of the side of his mouth. "He's right there in the chair, Moony."

The glare that Remus shot his friend was truly scathing. "I know that!"

Sirius looked concerned. "Then why do you keep saying Harry... oh." He turned back to face Harry, who was watching this exchange with an unreadable look in his eyes.

Harry watched as realization dawned in Sirius' eyes. Silence reigned for a couple of long, almost painful moments. Harry spoke. "Yes, you are both right. The bond is no longer effective."

Remus blinked in surprise and then schooled his face into rather polite blankness. It was a typical response for him. When he was unsure of where a conversation or situation was heading, Remus tended to play it very safe until he had a better idea of what was going on. Harry decided right then never to play any serious card games with the former werewolf. That poker face was enviable.

Sirius, on the other hand, was much easier to read. Harry just didn't understand what he was reading. He couldn't figure out why, for a split second, his godfather's eyes shone with worry. Sirius stepped forward. "Harry, please, the bond was a mistake. I know that now, and I am sorry. We really thought that you would need help." Sirius looked down, and admitted. "I needed help when I got out, and we

assumed that you'd be the same. I never considered what the bond would mean if you didn't need us. It was never our intention to try to push you in any way." Harry opened his mouth to comment, but Sirius rushed on. "No, please, let me finish?" He looked at Harry with pleading in his eyes.

Harry leaned back in his chair and then nodded once. "Fine. Say what you need to." He folded his arms, looking forbidding. So far, things were going pretty much as he'd anticipated. They had assumed that he'd figured out some magic to break the bond, not that it had dissolved on its own. He was perfectly content to let them think that for a while. Forgiven or not, he was in no mood to make this easy on his godfather.

Sirius winced slightly, but plunged on. "I know that there isn't anything I can do to make this right. What happened, what I thought happened, what I did, that's unforgivable and I know that." Sirius looked up. The pain in his eyes brought back memories of how he had looked, all those years ago, when he was talking about his mistake of trusting Wormtail and what it had cost him both in his own life and in the loss of two of his closest friends. "It's all my fault, Harry. I was even the one who went to talk to Ron and Hermione. They were arguing up until then, but they..." He swallowed hard. "...they believed me."

Harry watched as his godfather looked down and almost visibly forced himself to continue. "Anyway, I know you hate me, but you should probably know that..." He looked momentarily lost, but found what he wanted to say soon enough. "I'm glad you found a way to break the bond, because you didn't like it, but you should know that whatever happens, the bond's still there for me." Harry raised an eyebrow. Sirius met his eyes. "If you ever need, or want, anything from me, it's yours. Anything. Merlin, Harry, I am so sorry for what I did to you." And then he waited for a response, looking remarkably like a criminal awaiting judgment.

Harry was somewhat stunned by the depth of the remorse that shone in Sirius' eyes. It also reinforced the fact that he was doing the right thing. But some things had to be said. "It's not something that I'll be able to forget." His voice was totally controlled, and Sirius slumped slightly at the words, but Harry just continued coldly. "I don't really

remember much from that first year or so, but I do remember that whenever the dementors left me alone long enough to actually think clearly, my thoughts were usually some variation of 'what's taking Sirius so long?'"

The words almost visibly slammed into Sirius, and he fell to his knees, unable to stay upright. He turned his face away from the light, but Harry saw the firelight reflect off the tears running down the other man's face. Remus didn't look much better, biting his lip so hard that it was nearly bleeding. Harry continued, needing to finish this. "I think it was the same day that I finally realized that no one was coming for me that I went insane, but frankly, I'm not really sure. It was all pretty blank for a while after that." Harry slid out of the chair and crouched before his huddled godfather. "Look at me, Sirius."

It was a command, and Sirius couldn't have disobeyed to save his life. Anguished blue eyes met searching green ones. "I can't forget waiting for you, Sirius, and I probably never will be able to. Nothing you could give me or do for me could ever erase that." Harry took a deep breath and stared at Sirius for a long moment. Sirius just looked back, his face awash with guilt, eyes nearly dead.

And then Harry did something that surprised both of the other men. He smiled. It was small, but it was still a genuine smile. For the first time in over six years, Harry looked closer to his actual age. Harry looked more alive when his eyes dropped the closed, guarded look. Remus felt a flare of hope, and didn't bother to suppress it as he would have normally. Why not hope? It had already been a night of miracles.

Harry stood, leaving Sirius on the floor, blinking up at him. "I didn't break the bond. It dissolved. You can't do anything to make this up to me, but I forgive you anyway."

Shock was written all over Sirius' face. He literally couldn't believe it. Harry had been so cold and furious for so long, and even though he had been lightening up over the last few weeks, Sirius had never even dared hope that Harry would forgive him. Perhaps learn to tolerate, but never forgive. When he finally spoke, the words were choked and soft. "W-what?"



Harry unconsciously looked almost exactly like his father as he answered, and that really didn't help Sirius process what he said any easier. "I forgive you, Sirius."

Sirius clambered to his feet, eyes wide, unbelieving. "Why?"

Harry thought, once again faced with the confusion of sorting through his own emotions to answer that question. Finally, he shrugged. "Because being hateful and angry is exactly what Voldemort would have wanted. It seems stupid when everything turned out right in the end. It was really Voldemort's fault, not yours. Hating the world isn't all it's cracked up to be. Choose one." He didn't give the reason that he'd given Snape. The Slytherin would understand that one far more than anyone else.

"But... but..." Sirius looked torn between accepting the situation before Harry changed his mind and knowing that it didn't seem right. "...I don't deserve..."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "No, quite frankly, you don't. But forgiveness isn't something you earn. It's a gift. You made a mistake, a bad one, to be sure, but a mistake. Everybody makes mistakes." Then his eyes hardened as he stepped forward and got right in Sirius' face. To Sirius' credit, he didn't cower when faced with the icy green eyes of his godson. "But I swear, Sirius, if you ever do anything like that to me again, you'd better hope that whatever it is kills me, because if not, the rest of your days are going to be both painful and numbered." Harry knew, deep down, even though he hated to acknowledge it, that if he was betrayed again, he would go dark. There was only so much a person could take.

Sirius didn't doubt this for a minute, but it hardly mattered. He spoke with absolute certainty. "I'd die first." He took in a long, shaky breath. "Thank you."

Harry backed off and grinned. "Call me Harry." He sat back down in his armchair with a sigh. "Well, that was overly emotional."

Sirius seemed unable to muster an answer to that. He just stood there for a moment and tried to process how much things had changed in just a few short minutes. Relief filled him and he silently swore to James and Lily on his very life that he wouldn't make any more mistakes.

Remus, who had been quiet all this time, correctly judging that godfather and godson needed to talk without interruption, stepped forward from where he had backed against the wall. "Thank you, Harry." The words held a wealth of meaning. "I can't thank you enough..." Remus trailed off, realizing for the first time the ramifications of what had transpired in the dungeons. Exactly how Harry had repaid his abandonment of him. True, he hadn't been a guardian to Harry, but Remus knew one thing about their relationship all those years ago. Harry had trusted him. If Harry had needed help, he would have went to Sirius first and the Weasleys second, but Remus would have been the third or fourth in line. Harry had trusted him, and for a werewolf, someone else's trust wasn't something to taken lightly. Except he had. And Harry's response to this was to cure him of the curse.

Remus staggered a little as he tried to comprehend every thing that had happened. Harry leaned forward and spoke with concern in his voice. "Remus? You all right?" The former werewolf's wide and unblinking stare was beginning to worry him. Just because Snape hadn't expected any strange reactions didn't mean there wasn't a possibility.

Sirius chuckled and waved his hand wildly in front of Remus' shocked face. There was no reaction. "It's shock. I think it just set in. He blanks out a bit when he's really surprised about something, although I have to admit that I haven't seen it this bad since the Christmas Ball in 7th year when Prongs and I blackmailed his girlfriend into telling him that she was preg..."

That snapped Remus out of it quite nicely. "Sirius Black, don't you dare even start on that. It wasn't at all funny!" His tone was laced with outrage, but a hint of laughter was evident as well.

Sirius grinned mischievously and mused to himself. "I wonder, I bet I still have those pictures somewhere..."

Remus just glared. "Do tell. Go ahead, I know exactly where the pictures detailing the entire scope of my revenge are. I'm sure Harry would love to see those." The tone of his voice was so dry it could have peeled paint.

Sirius paled slightly at the memory. "No, no, no, that's quite all right. We'll just forget the whole matter, right?"

Harry burst into laughter. Both of the other men whirled, having momentarily forgot his presence. He waved a weak hand. "Oh, no, please don't stop, I haven't laughed this hard in years."

In hindsight, it wasn't the best thing to say. Sirius winced at the term 'years' and started babbling another longwinded apology. Remus, deprived of Sirius' jokes to keep his mind off of his newfound freedom, just wandered over the hearth and started touching the silver candlesticks in awe.

Harry just laughed.

Looking back later, Harry was amazed by the quickness of the events that followed. He hadn't even been reconciled with his godfather and former professor for more than two days, both of which were filled with discussion, the occasional tense moments, and Sirius' continual apologies, when Murphy's law struck again. The discussions, which ranged from what had happened in the outside world while Harry was imprisoned to tales of the Marauders in all their prank filled glory, were quite enjoyable and the tense moments began to lessen as the three of them relaxed more around each other. However, Harry firmly believed that the apologies had to stop. They were beginning to drive him crazy.

This was the reason that he wasn't entirely surprised to look up on the evening of the second day and see Sirius coming towards him with a serious look on his face. Harry steeled himself for another apology and was pleasantly surprised when there wasn't one. "Harry, I'm sorry, but it's important. I just got an owl from Moody. There's

been an emergency Order of the Phoenix meeting called. Remus and I, we need to go."

Harry raised an eyebrow in curiosity and nodded his agreement. "Of course, you don't have to ask me anymore, you know. What's going on, or do you know?" Thoughts of a new dark lord, an uprising of something or other or maybe even problems at Hogwarts flowed through his mind.

Sirius looked down. "The letter was pretty brief, being from Moody and all, but I think... I think something's wrong with Dumbledore." He looked up, worry in his eyes.

That wasn't what Harry was expecting at all.

COMING SOON: An emergency, a meeting, and moving on.

Whew. That was a tough chapter. Important, but hard to write. It looks like (unless I get carried away again, and you all know how that goes...) we're one chapter away from full explanations, and possibly two or three and an epilogue from the... END! Thank you so much for all of the wonderful and encouraging reviews. -krtshadow

## CHAPTER 30

### Passing

Remus wasn't at all surprised that Harry decided to go with them to Hogwarts, where the meeting was to be held. It seemed like something Harry would do. What he couldn't figure out was why. Harry had forgiven himself and Sirius, but Remus didn't really think that he'd done the same for the headmaster. Harry hadn't mentioned anything, but there was still a small flare of anger in his eyes as he listened to the conversation going on between Sirius and Remus. He obviously still held a grudge against the headmaster. Remus shrugged off his curiosity and continued his argument with his friend. "He's an old man, Sirius, it doesn't have to be a curse or poison, you know."

Sirius shook his head stubbornly, refusing to budge on his idea that it had been some type of foul play that had put Albus Dumbledore in a bad way. "But... Dumbledore?"

Remus sighed. "Dumbledore is human, you know!" Then he turned to see how Harry was reacting to this topic. He was even planning on drawing Harry in to the conversation if at all possible, since that was likely the only way that he was going to get any clues as to what the younger man was thinking. But Harry was gone. That did surprise Remus. It also caused him to realize that trying to either predict or understand Harry Potter was bound to be a lost cause.

Meanwhile, Harry had donned his invisibility cloak, and was heading for the dungeons, where the ever-useful Marauder's Map showed Severus Snape's location to be. Harry needed answers, and although he knew that both Remus and Sirius would tell him everything that they knew, it was obvious from their conversation that it wasn't going to be enough. Harry's curiosity definitely came from his more Slytherin side. His patience was all Gryffindor, though, as in non-existing. Unless he had a good reason to be patient, of course, which was probably Slytherin again.

Sure enough, Snape was visible as soon as Harry rounded the corner of the corridor that led to the dungeons. The potions master looked

unusually worried as he strode towards Harry, who was reminded that Snape owed Albus Dumbledore his freedom and his life. Which was very similar to what he owed Harry. Harry cleared his throat, and was amused to see the bane of his Hogwarts years jump in surprise. He removed the cloak. "Sorry about that. I'd actually forgotten that I'd had it on."

Snape took a deep, calming breath, and looked as if he was only just restraining his temper. "Potter. What now?"

Harry fell into step beside him, utterly ignoring the glare that would have struck fear in his heart six years earlier. "What's going on?"

Snape looked surprised. "How did you hear... oh, of course, the slaves were called to the Order meeting."

Harry nodded and then raised an eyebrow. "They're not technically slaves anymore."

Snape sneered. "Will they do anything you tell them to? They're slaves."

Harry shot him a deep, searching glance, eyes unreadable and hard. When he spoke, his voice was very quiet. "And what does that make you, Severus Snape?" Harry mentally grinned. Snape was a good man underneath all of his inherent sarcasm and annoying traits, but he did occasionally need to be reminded that Harry wasn't a student or just a normal wizard anymore. The good thing was that, Snape being Slytherin and capable of picking up on inferences, Harry wouldn't need to come right out and warn Snape about his attitude. This little incident would do fine.

Snape got the message quite clearly. He, too, would obey Harry as long as the orders were not dark, and possibly even if they were, depending on the circumstances, and he knew it. He let out a minuscule sigh of relief as Harry turned his eyes straight ahead again. He wasn't concerned that Harry would hurt him or anything, but he knew that Harry was not someone that it was wise to annoy. He'd gotten used to their rather strange information exchange type of friendship, although he never would have admitted it. "Fine, so they

aren't slaves." He hurriedly changed the subject. "Dumbledore has been fading slightly over the last few months. He's also been hiding said fact, which is very annoying but also very Dumbledore."

"Fading? Is he ill?" Harry wasn't a huge fan of the headmaster's but neither did he want him dead. He was just a little harder to forgive than anyone else, but Harry was fully planning on getting to it someday.

"Well, he's not getting any younger, but the biggest problem is the wards." Harry's puzzled look caused Snape to explain further. "We had no idea when the Dark Lord would be attacking, and he had been so quiet even to me, so we knew that he was planning something big."

Harry interrupted. "Oh, and it was, too." The smile that crossed his face wasn't anything less than a smirk, and a rather evil looking one at that.

Snape looked highly curious, but restrained himself. He had already annoyed Harry once this evening and he didn't care to do it again. "Hogwarts was a very desirable target for Voldemort. We, the Order, that is, needed it as a fallback, a place of last defense, if it came to that. It had to be safe. Dumbledore, with the help of the Order, added new wards, both outside and interwoven with the normal Hogwarts defenses." Snape shook his head, amazed. "A lot of new wards, even for a wizard of his power. And he anchored them in his own magical core. A highly dangerous, if effective measure and never intended to be a long-term solution. Since if there were an attack, Dumbledore would be at Hogwarts behind the wards anyway, he was the obvious anchor. Then, when you so kindly rid the world of that evil git, the extra wards were no longer necessary. I thought that he'd removed them, but from what Pomfrey says, he's still being drained. And now, he's too weak go through the process to release them."

Harry winced. "He needs to get better before he can get rid of them, and he needs to get rid of them before he can get better. Wonderful."

Snape nodded and continued. "Yes. According to Pomfrey, he'd be fine if it wasn't for the extra drainage. Well, not exactly fine, but alive,

if well overdue for retirement from such a stressful and draining job. But, with the problem we have here, well..." Snape looked uncharacteristically worried. "He could die. And if he dies while the wards are still anchored to him, it is possible, unlikely, but possible, that he could take Hogwarts defenses down entirely. While Voldemort isn't a threat any longer, neither can we afford to be unprotected for the months, possibly even years, that it would take to get even half of the wards back up again. Some of them date from the time of the Founders."

Harry blinked. "So, what's the plan?" He was beginning to seriously hope that there was a plan. He didn't know much about wards beyond what he had picked up from his books and studying his own home's wards. Still, he knew enough to know that Snape was probably under emphasizing the problems that would be caused if Hogwarts' wards fell.

Snape shrugged as they entered the corridor that led to Dumbledore's office, where Harry gathered that the meeting was being held. "We'll have to figure out some way to help him. Maybe a power-sharing spell, or a linkage to remove the weight of the spells. I don't know." Snape paused at the gargoyle. "Will you be joining us? I assure you that you would be welcome. In all fairness, you should have been a member years ago."

Harry shook his head. "No." He left it at that. Snape nodded, probably assuming that Harry didn't want to deal with the Order, and he wasn't all that wrong. Harry watched as Snape muttered a typically sweet password and headed up the staircase. Loud conversation could already be heard. The gargoyle slid closed with a thud, effectively cutting off the sound. Harry turned and walked away again.

It was late enough that the students were asleep, or should have been. The map revealed that the two trouble makers that Harry had fostered along were slouching through their own common room, likely with some mischief in mind, but Harry didn't think that they would get anywhere near the headmaster's office. Not on purpose, anyway. He didn't have to worry about them.



Harry knew the way to the infirmary quite well, even if it had been years since his last visit. The most familiar part of it was the smell, the starchy clean scent with the faintest hint of whatever potions Snape had most recently delivered. As he entered and noticed its obvious emptiness, Harry wondered if he'd assumed wrong, and that Dumbledore was somewhere else. Then he heard a faint movement from a door at the end of the long room. Madam Pomfrey suddenly emerged from a small room and headed into her office, not seeing Harry. Harry donned his invisibility cloak as soon as she was out of sight, and carefully edged into the open doorway.

Albus Dumbledore lay on the bed, looking weaker and more tired than Harry had ever seen him. He had lost weight, as was evidenced by the thinness of his wrists and the slightly sunken nature of his cheeks. Fawkes was perched on the back of a chair near his head, and the beautiful bird was crooning an encouraging melody. However ill Dumbledore may have looked, Harry soon had proof that his mental processes were still fully intact. "Hello, Harry. Come in, if you like."

Harry shrugged out of the cloak, remembering that he'd always suspected that the headmaster wasn't fooled by it. "Headmaster." He moved into the room, standing at the foot of the bed, and suddenly entertaining thoughts along the lines of 'what am I doing here?'. "How are you?"

Dumbledore's smile was strained as he spoke softly. "Not very well, I'm afraid." He paused for a moment and Harry could feel some magical energy shift slightly and then be forced back into place. Fawkes' song intensified for a moment, as if to help the aged man through his struggle to control the magical energies tied to him. He took a deep breath before speaking again. "Still, I'm glad to see you again, Harry. I had wondered if you might join the Order meeting."

Harry shrugged slightly. "I came with Sirius and Remus, for lack of anything better to do, not to join the Order."

Dumbledore sent Harry a searching stare that wasn't at all weakened by the fact that he was ill and in bed. "Sirius and Remus? Not Black and Lupin?"

Harry nodded, but didn't elaborate. Dumbledore looked momentarily pleased, but was suddenly forced to wrestle with the wards again. This time Harry watched on the magical level, noticing that Dumbledore was connected to Hogwarts on several levels. The problem came from the wards, which, in his weakened state, were just too much for him to keep in place. Harry was impressed with the pure scope of the protections, Dumbledore had been as ready for an attack as one could possibly be. As soon as Dumbledore had things under control, Harry spoke. "I'm sorry to have disturbed you, I'll leave." It was increasingly difficult to stay angry with a potentially dying man, and the last thing that Harry wanted to do was to distract the man and cause him to lose his already fragile control.

But before he could turn to go, Dumbledore spoke up. "No, please, Harry, stay. It helps to get my mind off of things. If you don't mind, that is?"

Harry almost left anyway, but somehow the faintly hopeful look in Dumbledore's eyes won him over. Inwardly swearing at his own softness, he moved to the chair and took a seat. "Why on earth didn't you let go of those wards once Tom was dead?"

Dumbledore winced slightly and spoke, his voice rough and weak. "I was busy, and thought I had time. It's not a good excuse, especially in hindsight, but one never really expects something like this to happen." He sighed. "I did take down some of them, enough so that I thought that I could handle the remainder for a while, as it take a rather complicated procedure to release the ones still up." Another long pause. "Between keeping the Ministry from bungling up things, and the trials of the death eaters, and the Hogwarts term starting, taking the wards down didn't seem to be that urgent."

Harry shook his head. "Mistake, that." Harry was surprised when Fawkes suddenly decided that Harry's lap would be a better perch than the chair back. "Uh, hello to you too, Fawkes." The bird trilled a greeting and twisted his neck to place his head under Harry's hand.

Dumbledore looked amused. "He likes you, but he'd like you better if you scratched his head a bit." Harry complied, and was rewarded

with a purr-like hum that automatically brought a smile to both men's lips. Then, returning to their previous conversation, the headmaster nodded grimly. "Well, it isn't the first, or the worst, mistake I've made. Have you forgiven Remus and Sirius, or have you just broken the bond?"

Harry inwardly smiled at Dumbledore's sudden change of topic. The older man was quite good at getting what he wanted out of a conversation. A talent that Harry just happened to share. Harry pointedly didn't answer the question. "Oh, so you saw the linkages too?"

Dumbledore's eyes shot over to Harry. "Too? You can sense magical auras?"

Harry shrugged. "Only had a fourth year formal education, Headmaster. I know a lot of things, but not necessarily the right name for them. What do you mean?"

Dumbledore looked mildly excited, which, Harry presumed, would have translated into extremely excited, had he been in better health. "Were you ever able to ever see the energy between you and your godfather? Can you see the magical core inside yourself? Judge the strength of spells and such?"

Harry blinked, somewhat surprised by the headmaster's reaction to something that he'd assumed was a normal part of being magical. He spoke cautiously. "Yes."

Dumbledore paused to have another brief but draining bout with the wards. However, he didn't let the distraction deter him from the topic. "Well, that certainly explains some things." No additional information was offered, and Harry didn't want to ask.

Harry was silent for a moment, then decided to answer Dumbledore's prior question. "I forgave them."

The words just sat there for a moment. Harry watched as a relieved smile slid over the older man's face. "I'm glad, Harry, that my mistakes didn't lose you anymore of your life than they already have."

Harry sighed and looked at the wall. He opened his mouth to speak, but cut himself off as Dumbledore seized up again. Harry watched in horror a look of pain swept over the headmaster's face. This one was worse than the last. Fawkes flew to the headboard of the bed and sang louder. Harry leaned forward and grabbed Dumbledore's hand, surprised at the strength of the pain-fueled grip. "I'll call Madam Pomfrey."

"She can't help." For a split second, Dumbledore had relief, and then it began again. He simply didn't have the power left to fuel the shields, and Harry had the feeling that they drained him not only of magic, but also of his very life.

"Merlin, Albus, give them to me." Harry couldn't stand to see anyone hurt like that, and instinctively knew that he could handle the wards.

"C-can't. Won't work. Tried with Sev-uhnnn."

Harry switched over to see the wards again. They were fluctuating wildly. The headmaster wasn't going to be able to hold them much longer. "I'm not Severus. Give them to me." Dumbledore looked at Harry for a long moment. Harry squeezed his hand. "Just let go. Trust me."

Harry was unaware of the fact that his eyes were glazed over with power, or that he was actually feeding magical power into Dumbledore through their gripped hands. It wasn't much in the grand scheme of things, but since it was theoretically impossible to do even that without a long and involved spell, it was enough to cause Dumbledore to do exactly what Harry asked of him. He trusted the younger man and let go.

Harry took the wards in as soon as they detached from the headmaster's magical core. A brief ripple of magic permeated the surrounding area, but Harry didn't notice. It was hard to anchor them to himself, but once it was done, the power drain settled to a steady pace. Harry began to sort them through, organizing the defenses in his mind so that he was prepared and ready just on the off chance that some stupid megalomaniac would decide to attack Hogwarts.

Then Harry's eyes flew open. "Headmaster! You gave..."

Dumbledore's eyes had regained that slight sparkle that managed to shine through his utter exhaustion. "A little unorthodox, but it worked quite well. And I'm not Headmaster anymore, now am I?" Before Harry could sputter out an answer to that, Dumbledore's eyes closed and he went still.

For one heart stopping moment, Harry thought that Dumbledore had died in front of his eyes. Fortunately for both Dumbledore and Harry's peace of mind, since he probably would have panicked, a closer look revealed that the aged wizard had merely fallen into a deep sleep. Harry sat back in his chair and stared blankly at the sleeping form on the bed.

Dumbledore hadn't just given him the extra wards, he'd given him Hogwarts herself. Harry was connected to the castle in ways that he had never even dreamed that the headmaster had been. If he tried, he could feel the state of the wards, could tell that the various dangerous objects scattered throughout the castle were not being disturbed, and that there was a boggart hiding in the third dungeon on the right, three floors below. He had the ability to see passwords, communicate instantaneously with any staff member, and contact the house elves.

Dumbledore had essentially made him Headmaster.

Voices caused Harry to stand and turn to face the door. Snape could be heard arguing with someone whose voice Harry recognized, but that he couldn't place. Harry grinned slightly as he picked up the thread of the conversation. The unrecognized voice seemed to be arguing with Snape over something. "But if it wasn't a ward, or heaven forbid, all of the wards falling, then what was it?" The voice, male and increasingly familiar as it got closer, must have been talking about the slight, but noticeable magical surge that had occurred as Harry had taken the wards.

Snape sounded annoyed, but frankly, that wasn't very unusual for the former spy. "I tell you, if the wards had fallen, it would have been

much worse than that. They'd have been feeling it a hundred miles away." Snape ground to a halt as he and the owner of the voice, now recognizable as Professor Flitwick, noticed Harry and the sleeping Dumbledore. Snape's eyes widened. "He's not...?"

Harry shook his head hurriedly. "He just fell asleep. And before you ask, that surge was me. Well, us, technically. I have the wards now, so the urgency isn't quite so... urgent."

Both men just blinked in surprise. Flitwick sputtered. "You have them? But... how?"

Harry didn't really know how to explain what he had done, so he just sent the small professor a knowing look and didn't comment. By doing that, he managed to look knowledgeable but secretive, and not stupid. Flitwick didn't press the issue. Very useful, that knowing look. He'd have to remember that one.

Snape sighed. "Harry, you're going to need to talk to the Order." He didn't sound as if he really was expecting Harry to comply, but that he had to say it. Harry was a loose cannon, blatantly powerful when there seemed to be no possible explanation for those powers. The Order had concerns about him already, and those concerns would only be growing as soon as they heard that Harry had the wards of their stronghold in his hands.

Harry, however, just nodded his agreement. Some explanations were in order, and doing them now had some definite good sides to it. Everyone concerned, with the exception of Dumbledore, was all in one place, and Dumbledore could hear of it later from a pensive or word of mouth. Harry really only wanted to say all of this once.

It was going to be hard enough to get through as it was. They were not exceptionally happy memories.

COMING SOON: Explanations, the Order, and information

OK, well this next chapter should be up by the end of the month, but no promises, school is rather rough this semester, and that's my main priority... The good news is, it looks like it may be the longest chapter

yet, since I think that it would be way to mean to break up the chapter in the middle of the long awaited explanations! Hope everyone has a nice week! - krtshadow

As a side note, I am winding up this story, so if you have any burning questions, now is the time to ask them so I get them answered in either the explanation chapter or my author's notes. There will be some things left unexplored, but hopefully we can keep it to a minimum...

## CHAPTER 31

### Tale

Harry passed the gargoyle with Snape and Flitwick behind him. Voices could be heard from a room that opened off of the headmaster's office. Voices that abruptly ceased as soon as Harry entered the room, which appeared to be some type of formal meeting room, complete with a long table surrounded by high-backed chairs. Harry scanned the room, noticing without surprise that every eye was firmly glued on him. Minerva McGonagall, who Harry hadn't seen in over six years, was seated along one side of the table along with the majority of the Hogwarts staff. Hermione and Ron sat on that side, while the rest of the Weasley family faced them along the opposite side. Scattered throughout were people that Harry didn't know, along with others that he did recognize, like Alastor Moody and Draco Malfoy. Empty seats were scattered around as well, and Harry wondered if members were just absent, or if casualties had caused holes to appear in their ranks. Moody was the first to break the ever-lengthening silence. "Well, Snape?"

Snape moved from behind Harry, seeming to don his sarcastic and cold Slytherin mask as he went. "The wards are still intact." He didn't comment on who held them.

A young woman called out from near Sirius. "And Professor Dumbledore?"

Flitwick answered that one as both he and Snape found their seats around the table. "He's fine. Sleeping, actually. However, we seem to lack a problem to discuss. Mr. Potter here now has the wards."

Every eye snapped back to Harry, who had so far been content just to stand in the shadows next to the door. Moody leapt to his feet and faced Harry, wand in hand and pointing at Harry's face. "Trying to take over from a dying man, boy?"

Harry really didn't care for the name 'boy'. Bad memories, all. But Harry bit back the urge to fight with the old auror and answered



calmly. "He was in pain, and mere minutes away from losing them entirely. If you like, I'll be happy to let them go and you can reconstruct them the way that you would have been if I hadn't been here."

Moody blinked, but the wand didn't waver. Harry was amused to see Sirius' wand focused squarely on Moody's back. He appreciated the thought, but he really didn't need the help. Moody looked at him with blatant distrust. "So, what do you plan on doing with your new acquisitions?"

Harry eyes narrowed in response. "Hold them until you find me someone to give them to."

Moody looked skeptical. "Are you sure you have the power for that, boy?"

Harry just looked at him. "Yes." The response was unequivocal. Moody lowered the wand grudgingly. Conversation exploded around the table, as it seemed like nearly every person present had an opinion that needed urgent airing. Sirius caught Harry's eye and waved him over to a seat near him. Harry moved around the table and sat between Sirius and the young woman that had spoken up earlier.

Sirius leaned closer to Harry and chuckled slightly. "You do know how to make a first impression. It must run in the family. Speaking of which, the graceful lady to your left is my cousin, Nymphadora Tonks."

The woman, who was currently sporting a rather strange hairdo in an even stranger magenta color, just sent Sirius a piercing glare and then smiled at Harry. "Sirius is a liar, I hope you know. I'm not at all graceful. And please..." She stressed the word. "...call me Tonks."

Harry shook her hand. "Harry Potter."

Tonks grinned, pulled her hand back and promptly knocked over her water glass. She ignored it as she commented with a laugh. "I never

would have guessed." Harry quickly stopped the water from flowing into her lap. "Oh, thanks."

"I didn't know... Siri... had any family." Harry grinned as Sirius winced at the use of the nickname.

Remus leaned over and interjected. "Family, yes. Family he wants to claim, not very much."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "I can't help it if the majority of my relatives were all pureblooded bigots."

Across the table and down a bit, Hermione watched in great relief as Harry interacted with the people around him, and especially Sirius. She had wondered why both he and Remus had seemed to be in such good moods, and now she knew.

Harry just sat and listened to the babble around him for a few minutes. The main problem seemed to be that everyone was cautious of Harry, and rightfully so, they didn't understand how he did what he did, and they knew that he had plenty of reasons to dislike them. Everyone was nervous. Finally losing patience with waiting for some one to get up the nerve to actually ask him some of the questions that they were asking everyone else, Harry spoke up. "If no one has any questions for me, I'm going home."

Everyone looked at Remus in surprise as he took control of the situation. Harry got the idea that he normally hadn't been one to speak up much. "I think the concern here is that we have very little idea of what we are dealing with when you say that you have the wards. Especially since that for all that we've ever heard of, it would be impossible to transfer the wards in the fifteen minutes or so that you had."

Harry helpfully inserted a fact. "It wasn't just the wards, he gave me control of the castle as well."

McGonagall choked. "He made you Headmaster?" Harry nodded.

Snape broke in. "It wasn't even fifteen minutes either, it was only ten. He spoke to me in the hall first."

Harry sighed. "Look. This is a really long story. I will explain, but listen up, because I will not be repeating this. Ever." Silence reigned supreme. "Most of you probably know that I had a connection with Voldemort. Visions and dreams, specifically. My imprisonment only enhanced that wonderful little aspect of my life. I don't really know if it was the dementors that brought it on stronger or if it would have done the same on the outside, but it doesn't matter. I was having a lot of visions." He shrugged. "Daily, sometimes even more frequently than that. They were frequently bloody, the dementors were affecting me very badly, and well, to make a long story short, I don't remember much past the first couple of weeks. It got to where I welcomed the visions, because the dementors didn't affect me there, and I could keep from going totally insane."

He winced slightly, a pained look flashing across his face for a split second. "Like I said, I don't remember details, but I did know that Voldemort was planning something huge. That was about the extent of my thought processes for a little over two years." The table at large winced along with him, and Sirius clenched his fists tight under the table. Harry seemed to randomly change the subject. "What do you know about haltia?"

Almost everyone looked blank, but Hermione came through as usual. "A powerful magic user from either another world, or another dimension, depending on who's retelling the story. A Finnish legend, I think, or Nordic."

"It's not a legend. And it's really from another reality. The crossover gives them some powers here that approach infinity, just as we would have in their reality if we were called over. Voldemort figured out how to do it." Silence reigned as everyone considered Voldemort with infinite power at his disposal.

Moody spoke up loudly. "If this is all true, then why haven't we heard of other people trying this? Every dark lord wannabe would be doing it!"

Harry didn't take offense at Moody's obvious skepticism, and answered the question. "It takes a lot of power. I'm not trying to brag or anything, but Voldemort, Dumbledore and myself are very likely the only ones who could attempt it, and even then, it's necessary to go through a two year blood ritual first. That's why Voldemort was so quiet. He considered me an immediate threat but had had really bad luck with trying to kill me. Once I was out of the way, he could take as much time as he needed to gather power. The other reason it's not commonly done is that it tends to backfire. The haltia are not comfortable in our realm, and tend to take it out on the one that called them here, therefore the ritual to try to control them. On top of that, this reality is not theirs, obviously, so they comprehend things differently, which causes even more problems."

Everyone listened quietly as Harry continued. "Anyway, you can read up on them if you like, but back to the explanations. I don't know the date exactly, but Voldemort had to go through that ritual, so it was more than two years into my imprisonment. Voldemort held the summoning, and I was lucky enough to be there in spirit, as it were. One thing that they don't tell you in the legends is that haltia are bound to the person they see first, not the actual person who did the calling." A small smirk spread across Harry's face. "That and the fact that they don't see any difference between a physical being and a spirit. Like a dream visitor."

Harry's smirk was echoed around the table as the majority of the members caught on. Harry remembered the horror of watching Voldemort summon the haltia, knowing in the pitiful shards of his injured mind that this was really, really bad, and then the shock of watching the luminescent figure of the haltia flicker into being and then flicker out again. Harry hadn't even managed to feel relieved, the dementors took the feeling away even if he was dreaming, but he had watched as Voldemort raged over his ruined plans. "Anyway, I guess the haltia saw me first."

The entire table began talking at once, most asking some variation of, "So what happened?"

Harry was silent for a moment and then finished his story rather abruptly. "The dementors no longer affected me as badly, I regained

my sanity, and through some magic I'm not sure I can even describe, much less explain, I learned a lot. Including some shortcuts in magical theory. Large shortcuts. I gained ways to do things faster and with less energy expended. I had no wand, so I had to learn wandless magic."

"All of this just didn't happen, it was a process that I had to go through. And now that I was sane, I spent quite a bit of time visiting Voldemort in visions. Not that he knew about it or anything. It all worked out quite well. I was getting close to the point where I was just going to break out and rain a little holy hell down on Voldemort. I had planned on working my way through his ranks, and doing it that way, but your little 'oh yeah, we're idiots' realization changed that." Harry's hand reached out and caught Sirius' head before he could slam it into the table. Snape smirked.

Hermione looked puzzled. "I understand all that, and it does explain quite a lot, but why the insane act? From what you say, you hadn't had any mental problems for years, why act insane to us?"

Harry's eyes went a few degrees colder than it was comfortable for anyone to be looking at him. "One part revenge, one part caution. You may or may not have known this, but Voldemort was getting information about you beyond what Snape was giving you. I have reason to believe that he had been working on a spell that recorded interesting information and played it back for him. I couldn't be sure that the spell wasn't on one of you, and I needed the element of surprise."

"Why?" This was Sirius' cousin, Tonks. "From what it sounds like, you could have taken him down anyway."

Harry blushed faintly, feeling a little uncomfortable with what seemed to him as bragging. "Well, maybe. But getting into a full blown wizards duel would have been risky, and I can almost guarantee that there would have been injuries if not deaths from bystanders. I didn't want to take that chance, so I took the less honorable, and much safer route."

"How very Slytherin of you." McGonagall looked faintly disapproving. Harry ignored the comment. Snape smirked again.

Harry stood. "So, find someone to take the headmastership and I'll hand it over." He headed back towards the office, needing to be away from all the curious eyes for a bit. Talking about Azkaban had been necessary, but it had been like flouting an intensely personal part of him for a roomful of people that he barely trusted.

Harry didn't hear Snape's side comment to McGonagall, but Hermione did as she rose with Ron to make sure Harry was OK. Snape spoke quietly. "I vote we don't look very hard."

McGonagall looked surprised by this remark, obviously remembering that Snape and the Potters had a bit of an unpleasant history. "YOU want HIM to be Headmaster?"

Snape narrowed his eyes and shot her a disbelieving look. "Can't you tell? He's Dumbledore 100 years younger. Albus didn't have to release the headmaster abilities to him, so he trusts him. The ministry definitely won't be taking over under him, and he's intelligent, powerful and a leader. He'll do what needs to be done. Who better?" If McGonagall had been surprised at his earlier comment, she nearly choked on this one.

Meanwhile, Hermione and Ron, the latter with great caution, entered the office to find that Sirius had beaten them to Harry. Harry looked up as they entered but didn't say anything, so Hermione took that as permission to stay. Ron seemed stuck between staying and leaving, managing to just sway in the doorway.

Sirius spoke quietly. "Harry, there's something you're not telling. You don't have to if you don't want to... but... well, I'll listen." He knew that there was something, there had been a pause as he spoke of the halia helping him, a pause telling of avoidance of an issue, but not revealing any more than that.

Hermione spoke. "Sorry, we're interrupting, we'll leave."

But as she turned to go Harry spoke up. "No, you might as well stay. Both, all of you. You are the only people that I really want knowing this anyway." He looked up. "Ron." Said personage gulped slightly. "Sit down, you're making me nervous."

Ron sat and muttered. "The feeling is mutual." And then gaped as Harry chuckled at the unintended sarcasm in his voice.

Hermione just smiled in relief. Harry had laughed. A real laugh. She could have sung. Sure, it was at Ron, but it was a laugh, and everyone tended to laugh at Ron now and then. Harry steeped his fingers and looked at Sirius. "It didn't exactly go as smoothly as I implied. The haltia was severely unhappy with being uprooted. The thing is that haltia are bound to give the caller obedience for three tasks, and then the haltia can go home. The dangerous part is that not only do they not see things the way that we would, they have a grudge. One has to be very, very careful about wording and the like."

Hermione looked thoughtful. "I wonder if that's where the legends of the muggle genie in a bottle came from. Or maybe the stories of the d'Jinn in Persian folklore."

Harry shrugged. "I have no idea." He didn't care either, but figured that was too rude to say.

Ron was still trying to understand. "So, did you say something wrong?"

Harry shook his head, eyes unreadable but full of some unnamed emotion. "I released it."

Sirius shut his eyes, understanding sweeping over him. He had shared a few of the same feelings at one point or another during his incarceration. But he was the only one that had it figured out. For once, Hermione was just as confused as Ron was. "Why on earth would you do that? You had wishes, er, tasks. You could have been free."

Harry sent her a blank look. "And on the run..."

Sirius finally found his voice. "Oh, Merlin, Harry, you thought..." Harry just looked at him, the eyes of two innocents meeting in a terrible understanding.

Harry nodded. "I guess you were right when you said you'd understand better than anyone."

"You know it's not true!" Sirius needed to be reassured.

Ron looked back and forth between them. "Um, what are you two talking about?"

Harry turned back to the pair, but couldn't say the words. So Sirius said them for him, never taking his eyes off of his godson. "The dementors... they... He thought that he deserved Azkaban. That's why he let the halia go."

Harry spoke before either Ron or Hermione could gasp in horror and shower him with platitudes that he already understood. His voice came out almost pouting, as he wrestled his memories and emotions under control. "But it wouldn't go, darn the thing. It owed me, it said, and then I think it read my mind, realized I wasn't the person that had yanked it from its world and then it had the nerve to feel sorry for me!" His sarcastic tone lightened the heavy tension brought on by Sirius' words. Harry knew that Ron and Hermione didn't understand, and hoped that they never would.

"So it fulfilled the tasks anyway?" This was Hermione again, voice full of characteristic curiosity.

Harry nodded. "It didn't make a lot of sense at the time, but I had a lot of time to think about it and I think it just pulled three things out of my mind. It didn't free me, because that wasn't exactly even on my mind at the time. It stopped the dementors from effecting me, told me the location of the home I'm now living in, and helped me along the way to my biggest desire, which was kicking some serious Riddle arse."

"Which you did quite well." Ron was still looking rather nervous, like he expected Harry to pounce on him at any moment. Harry just looked at him, seeing an old friend and wondering what kind of a man



Ron had matured into. He wasn't sure that either Ron or Hermione were going to be his best friends ever again. Forgiven, yes. Trusted, probably. Everything back to normal and the trio is together forever, unlikely.

Hermione jumped in to fill the awkward silence. "Actually, Harry, I have a bone to pick with you!" Her voice was annoyed. Harry blinked and shifted attention to her, not having any clue what she was talking about. "You, you... Marauder!"

Sirius' attention flew to Harry. "What'd he do?" Far from concerned, his voice sounded eager.

Hermione stood and shook her finger in Harry's face. "Don't even bother denying it, Harry Potter! You gave Maxwell and Andrews the Marauder's Map. Four times! Four times I've been pranked in the last week!"

Harry assumed an innocent and affronted look and pulled the original map from his pocket. "You mean this map?"

Hermione blinked. "Oh."

Ron chuckled. "Oh, good one, 'Mione, just accuse him of something he didn't d..." His voice trailed off as he realized what he was saying and that bringing up that probably wasn't a good idea.

Hermione turned and glared at Ron. "Shut up!"

Harry laughed. "Nice to know you haven't changed any, Ron. Still have a hard time walking with your foot in your mouth half the time?"

Ron looked embarrassed. "Sorry, Harry. Really, I'm sorry." His tone made it clear he wasn't only talking about his little slip of the tongue.

Harry stared at him for a long, tense moment. "Don't do it again." He shifted his eyes to Hermione. "That goes for you as well."

They nodded, gathering from his tone the subtext of the comment. They were forgiven, but on probation. They both looked very relieved.

Harry knew that he would need to take their relationship slowly. He was still hurt at what they had believed of him, and he wasn't yet ready to make either of them welcome in his life on a daily basis. He really didn't even know them any more. They had been through their shaping and formative years without him. People change far more in between 15 and 21 than they do in almost any other six years of time. He would have to almost just start over with them. Maybe things could get repaired... eventually. He hadn't yet had as much contact with them as he had his godfather and former professor, and time definitely was a factor in his working past painful issues.

He could wait. If they couldn't... well, that would be their loss.

Unintentionally interrupting the moment, Remus poked his head in the doorway and motioned to the group. "Harry, we have a few additional questions for you, now that we've had a chance to talk things over a bit. Do you mind?"

Harry shook his head, he didn't care, but he literally had no idea what they wanted to ask him. He rose to follow Ron and Hermione out of the room, but Sirius caught his arm. "Harry, you do know you didn't deserve Azkaban, right? You were just a boy. There is nothing you could have possibly done that would deserve that. And before you say it, Cedric was in no way your fault." Harry nodded, he did know that, but it was nice to hear someone else say it. Unfortunately, Sirius didn't stop there. "I am so sorry, H..."

"All right, that's it. Sirius, I know that you are sorry, and I appreciate you being here for me now and all that, but I swear that if you apologize to me once more I am going to put you through the nearest wall." Harry leaned closer and glared. "Without magic." Sirius blinked and decided to not apologize anymore. "It's over, and I'm not angry at you anymore. I trust you. Relax, OK? You're about to drive me insane, and I've been there, done that, got the T-shirt." Sirius looked blank. Harry sighed. "Muggle expression, sorry..." He smirked and lowered his voice to a secretive whisper. "And you might be interested to know that, yes, there are two young men getting a little help from Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs. Pass it along, I'm sure Remus will be properly appalled."

Sirius grinned widely as they walked back into the Order room and sat. "Appalled? He's not a professor anymore, remember?"

Grinning slightly, Harry looked around the table questioningly. "What's the problem?"

Remus seemed to be the one elected to tell him. "Well, Harry, we would like to know if you would consider keeping the Headmaster position for Hogwarts." Harry's jaw dropped slightly. Remus went on to say something about them discussing the matter and him being the best candidate, but Harry didn't really comprehend much of it. They wanted him to stay? The Order of the Phoenix wanted him to be in charge of the next generation of magical children?

Harry realized that everyone was waiting for his response to Remus' little speech and struggled to find something to say. "Uh." He knew that he could do better than that. "I'm honored, but do you really know what you are getting into?"

Mr. Weasley spoke up. "You are young, but you have been through more than most people. Experience is far more important than age, especially in a position like this."

Remus added. "You care about people, and are willing to do what is necessary to either protect them or straighten out their ways. That is a very good quality for a Headmaster to have."

Snape put in his two knuts. "You aren't even blatantly one house anymore. We can trust you to be fair to all houses."

Tonks spoke up, waving her hands wildly and only just missing her water glass. "You won't let the Ministry take over, and that's definitely a good thing!"

Moody finished up, stating gruffly. "And Dumbledore wouldn't have had to give you what he did. He obviously wanted you, and that's good enough for me."

Harry took all this in with a calm expression and a roiling mind. Unsure of what to say, he stalled. "I thought that the Governors had to decide this kind of thing."

McGonagall spoke up. "Hogwarts was established far before the Ministry was. The Board of Governors has some power over us, yes, but not nearly as much as they think that they do. The school rarely bothers reminding them of this, but it can be done. The Governors chose most of the headmasters in recent history, but traditionally, the current headmaster passed it on to a protégée of his, with the approval of the staff. If we force the issue, the Board of Governors should along with us."

"They will." Draco spoke up from the corner, where he had been quietly listening to every nuance of the conversation. "I inherited Father's seat."

Harry raised an amused eyebrow at the blonde. "And if they don't?"

Draco's sneer was so perfect that it had to have been practiced in front of a mirror. "They'll wish they had." Harry accepted that as truth, he didn't doubt in the slightest that Draco was quite capable of taking over the reins of power that Lucius had let fall with his death. Better him than some other, more darkly inclined pureblood.

Harry took a moment to think. Was this something that he wanted? A place to belong, a place to make a difference, a place to influence the future? It seemed right. He knew that he could do it, knew as well that there were likely to be a few candidates over the years that he could pass on his rather peculiar knowledge of magic to. He shut his eyes for a moment, extending his mind along the link that connected him to Hogwarts. The school was almost sentient, and seemed to welcome him as he wandered mentally. It was quite fascinating, really, knowing that the Squid was currently in the north end of the lake, and that the boggart had moved over a dungeon since he'd last checked. The Room of Requirement was currently unoccupied, and Harry felt that there was something very familiar about it, but couldn't quite place what it was. He shrugged it off, knowing that it would come to him eventually. He could sense that Sirius and McGonagall were both animagi, and Remus... was one too? He would have to talk to him

about that, it must be a side effect of the cure. Harry wondered, not for the first time, whether his connection to the old castle was greater than that of previous Headmasters because of his abnormal magical training.

And then he realized that he had just thought of himself as Headmaster. It had been normal. It had felt right. It was right.

He opened his eyes. Everyone was watching him. "Fine." Conversation began again. "But..." He raised a hand for silence and was rewarded with it instantly. He sent them a slow, sarcastic smirk that forcibly reminded most of the older members of James Potter. His green eyes sparkled with laughter. "But... one of you has to explain to the rest of the world just why you want a Headmaster that never even sat the OWL's."

END

Whew. Well, that's pretty much it. There will be an epilogue coming soon, but it isn't looking like it will very long. Let me know if I missed any major questions, and if I did, I'll try to get them answered one way or another. Thank you for your reviews. I still can't quite believe that this story has been as popular as it has been. Thanks again, krtshadow.

Well, this is it...

## DISCLAIMER IN CHAPTER 1

Epilogue:

Busy

Two days later:

Harry ran a distracted hand through his already ruffled hair. He had never realized just how much paperwork a headmaster had to review, understand and sign off on. Not to mention nearly every parent with a child in the school had sent him an owl, some congratulatory regarding his new position and some not. They all needed a personal reply. And then there was paperwork from the ministry to fill out. And the way that this day was already going it wasn't going to be finished anytime soon. People just wouldn't leave him alone.

Remus poked his head in the door and had to stifle a grin at the frazzled look on Harry's face. "You wanted to see me?"

Harry looked up. "Oh, Remus. Yes, actually. The curse against Defense against the Dark Arts teachers still seems to be going strong. Except now they aren't even lasting a year. Professor Amaris was suddenly called home yesterday evening. Her husband is very ill with..." Harry drew a blank. "Well, she told me, but I can't remember. I was wondering if you would be interested in the job, either full time, or just for a short while until I find someone else."

Remus sat down in the chair in front of Harry's desk. Dumbledore's belongings still filled the office, but Harry had had to clean out the desk in order to get some work done. "Favoritism, Harry?"

Harry nodded. "Sure. If you want to call it that. I need a good Defense teacher. You were my favorite DADA teacher, and well recommended by Dumbledore in his files. I believe the exact quote was, 'Note to self: Convince to return at some later date, way too stubborn now.' The way I see it, your one good excuse is gone now."

Remus looked tempted. "Well, I was planning on working with werewolves..." Although the Lycan potion, as the papers had named Harry and Snape's collaboration, was working quite well, there was still work to be done to get government aid for those who couldn't pay for the expensive ingredients. Not to mention the fact that many werewolves were hermits or living in secrecy and poverty and might not even hear of their new opportunity.

Harry could see why that would be important to the former werewolf. "I think that it would do your cause a lot of good to have such a visible job. You can prove that being a former werewolf isn't anything to be ashamed of. You'll also have the ability to talk to the whole next generation about the unfairness of how you and others were treated. Hopefully, discrimination like that will never happen again." Harry could see that Remus wasn't totally convinced and added his final gambit. "Plus, there's always summers to go crusading..."

Remus smiled. "You argue like your mother. Very well, I'll accept the position for this year. We can discuss the future at the end of the term. Good thing I kept all of my old class schedules. I'll go get started on updating them."

Harry smiled back. "Wonderful. Feel free to corral any wandering students to tell you what they've covered already this year." It was a Hogsmeade weekend, which left the castle mercifully quiet for the most part.

Remus nodded his agreement. "Thank you, Headmaster." He left, already muttering something under his breath about adding the impervious curse to the 6th year work.

Harry rolled his eyes at the title and returned to his paperwork. He managed to write exactly three words before he was interrupted again. "Hello, Harry."

Albus Dumbledore stood in the doorway. "Professor!" Harry looked suspicious. "Are you supposed to be up?"

The former headmaster looked slightly guilty as he checked over his shoulder. "Not exactly, but I needed to talk to you. And, please, call me Albus."

Harry motioned towards the chair. "You could have had Madam Pomfrey come and get me, you know. I didn't even realize you were awake yet."

Dumbledore sat, leaning a cane against his knees. "I awoke several hours ago. And before you ask, yes, I have been filled in on the pertinent facts that I missed while sleeping the day away. I hope that you don't feel forced into this, Harry." He waved one wrinkled hand around the office. "I didn't realize until I had a chance to think it over with a bit of a clearer mind that you may have felt pressured by my actions, and I certainly didn't intend that."

Harry met the headmaster's gaze. "Pro- er, Albus, I didn't feel forced. I'm actually enjoying the challenge so far, but I have to admit that this paperwork is beginning to wear me down." He looked mournfully at the stack of letters to answer.

Dumbledore chuckled, relief at Harry's remarks clear in his eyes. "Good. Harry, I am being perfectly honest when I say I truly believe that you will make an excellent headmaster, one that hopefully will serve for many years. I am also being perfectly honest when I say that paperwork will survive anything you throw at it. I have tried everything, believe me."

Harry sighed. "Now you tell me..." He suddenly had a thought and pulled a folded up piece of parchment from the nearest drawer. "Now that you're here, I do have a question or two, if you are feeling up to it."

Dumbledore looked happy that Harry was willing to ask for his help. "Of course, Harry. I haven't left you the easiest of jobs. Anything I can do to help I will."

Harry nodded his thanks. "So, what's up with the History of Magic position? Why is it empty?"



Dumbledore sighed. "Regulations. Over the several decades, Hogwarts graduates have averaged the lowest N.E.W.T.'s grades on that subject in over three hundred years. Professor Binns seems to be incapable of making the class as interesting as it needs to be to keep students attention. I had to let him go at the end of last year, and haven't been able to find a teacher yet. Binns has been teaching for so long that there aren't very many alumni even capable. To be honest, I was beginning to get quite desperate. Professor Granger could have done it, but she's overworked already between her Care of Magical Creatures class and leading two advanced study clubs."

"I could do it." Both men looked up. Sirius stood in the doorway, where he had obviously been listening in. "Merlin knows that my mother drilled enough of it into me."

Dumbledore blinked. "You did do remarkably well on your History N.E.W.T, if I remember correctly. Best in the class, wasn't it? I would have contacted you over the summer, but at the time, I wasn't sure as to your current situation."

Sirius nodded in response to Dumbledore's question. "Nice to know my family was good for something, although I do have my doubts about Merlin really being a Black incognito."

Harry just blinked. "You? A professor?"

Sirius winced. "Wouldn't James laugh to hear that. Anyway, I still think that I could do it. At least for a while."

Harry thought for a moment and then shrugged. "Works with me. You can't possibly be as boring as Binns was. You're hired." Sirius chuckled merrily and turned to leave. Harry stopped him. "Blow up the classroom and I'll be the first headmaster to give a professor detention."

Dumbledore laughed. "Not quite the first, Harry."

Sirius nodded condescendingly. "I'll be a good little Black, really."

Harry rolled his eyes and continued, suddenly remembering something that he'd forgotten. "Oh, and if you see Remus before I do, tell him that the wards are seeing him as an animagus. Don't ask me why. He may want to look into it."

Sirius blinked. "Really? Huh. Well, he did go through most of the rituals with us, maybe that has something to do with it."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know." Sirius left, leaving Harry and Dumbledore alone again. Harry sighed and rubbed his head. "I don't think I quite know what I'm getting into here..."

Dumbledore chuckled softly and smiled at Harry, eyes still full of life behind his small glasses. "You'll do fine."

"So, what are you planning to do with your free time?" Harry chuckled suddenly. "The way it's been going, I can probably find you a job..."

Dumbledore laughed. "Actually, I think I will write a book. I've always wanted to, and now that I have a bit of time on my hands, we'll see if I actually can."

Harry grinned. "I'll look forward to reading it. I..." Whatever he was planning on saying was lost as the door slammed open once again.

Severus Snape stood in the doorway, looking unusually emotional for a Slytherin. The emotion was one part shock, one part disbelief. "You've hired LUPIN?"

Harry sat back, folded his arms, and narrowed his eyes. "Yes. And before you start ranting, name me one good reason, other than the fact that you don't like him, that he won't do perfectly well."

"But... but..."

Harry continued casually. "I even know that you aren't jealous, because I just read your file." Harry had been able to lay to rest his childhood suspicion about Snape coveting the DADA position with the proof that Dumbledore had offered the position to him twice. Potions

was the older man's true calling, and they both knew it. He loved teaching his art, and would continue to do so as long as he was able.

Snape sighed and sat down heavily on a chair next to Albus. "Fine." His voice was still faintly petulant.

Harry conjured up a cup of tea for both of his two guests. Mischievously, he waited until Snape had taken a swallow before he spoke again. "The History position has been filled as well. I believe you know Sirius Black?"

Snape's reaction was truly priceless. Somehow, the professor managed to keep from spitting out his tea. When he finally managed to get control of himself, the only thing that he could seem to muster in response was a drawn out moan. He looked up at Harry beseechingly. "Please tell me you are joking."

Harry shook his head. "You two will just have to learn to stay out of each other's way. I suppose it's too much to ask that you try to get along?" Snape just glared. "Try. You have much more in common than you know."

Dumbledore spoke up. "If you can get those two to realize that, you will have accomplished more than I ever have." His eyes twinkled with laughter.

Snape took a deep breath and shook his finger in Harry's face. "This is nepotism!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Neither of them are related to me. They are just friends. And you're still working here, aren't you?"

Snape blinked, realized that there was more than one way to look at that comment, and looked faintly pleased. Not to be sidetracked for long, he tried one last time. "There will be trouble, mark my words."

Harry grinned. "If you can't figure out a way to handle it, maybe I should reconsider who holds the Slytherin Headship. You all are supposed to be the sneaky, manipulative ones. However, I'll repeat

what I told him. Professors can be given detention if things get out of hand."

Snape glared at Dumbledore for a brief second. "Yes, I know." Sighing, he stood and placed his teacup and saucer on the desk. "Well, at least both the Defense and History classrooms are on the other side of the castle." He left grumbling, but Harry thought that it was done more for effect than any real anger.

Dumbledore waited until the door shut behind the potions master, and then burst into laughter. "Oh, masterfully handled. I couldn't have diffused him better myself. You may get them to work well together yet."

Harry smirked slightly. "It will take a miracle." He might be able to manage it. He wasn't going to be placing any large bets on the matter, though.

Dumbledore finished his tea and opened his mouth to speak when a knock sounded at the door. A voice called from outside. "Headmaster Potter, I'm dreadfully sorry, but is Albus in there?"

Albus paled and stood. "Perhaps I should go now, Harry. It was nice to speak to you." He waved his wand once and muttered a few words just as the door opened to reveal Madam Pomfrey with her hands on her hips. Knickknacks and magical oddities flew from all over the room, shrinking as they came. In two seconds, all of Dumbledore's personal possessions were stowed inside a small sack.

Madam Pomfrey looked annoyed. "Sneaking out of bed like a second year, really, Albus, I thought better of you. And give me your wand! You know you aren't supposed to be doing magic. It won't be my fault if you relapse." She huffed angrily. "You should be ashamed. Honestly!"

Ignoring the nurse's tirade, Dumbledore nodded cheerily to Harry as he was herded out the door. "Well, Harry, you'll have to fill your own walls now. Good luck!"

Harry just watched as the door shut. He scanned the now rather bare room and smiled thoughtfully. He would have to get some of his books brought over. And his broom, definitely. And maybe he could figure out away to link his castle to Hogwarts so that he could go home for more than just the summer holidays.

But before he could even think about any of that, he had an awful lot of work to do. Harry looked at the stack of papers, groaned, and shot an extremely strong locking charm at the door.

A smile crossed his face. Hard work had never been foreign to him, and for the first time in a long time, Harry felt content, even happy with where he was and the prospects for the future.

Life didn't look like it was going to be boring anytime soon.

REALLY THE END!

LONG AUTHORS NOTE

(Hopefully answering all remaining questions...)

First of all, I want to thank everyone who read and reviewed my story. I can honestly say that I wouldn't have spent as much time on this story as I did if it hadn't been for your support and encouragement. You all are wonderful. I found it fascinating how deeply people looked at what I wrote. Sometimes way more than I did! Forgiveness and the process leading up to that was obviously the theme that I had in mind from the beginning, and I am reasonably happy with the finished product and what it portrays.

A note from the last chapter: I forgot to say that the term *haltia* is from Finland. (Would that be Finnish? shrugs I dunno...) I just got the term out of an online translator. I'm American, and I do know that *haltia* means fairy and not really anything close to what I described, but I do have an excuse. I kind of did it on purpose, the idea being that we muggles wouldn't know what we were talking about... Anyway, that's my story and I'm sticking to it. Also, Harry's actual power level is the same as it would have been if he hadn't been in Azkaban. The *haltia* didn't actually add any power to him, but taught him new and different

ways to use his magic, making him more efficient and stronger. It's like the human body, most of us have the ability to fight to some extent, but there is a difference between instinctual fighting and something like karate, and an even larger difference between a beginner and a master. Essentially, Harry is a master of his way of using magic, one that isn't known or understood by anyone else in the magical community. This gives him an advantage over witches and wizards who have no way of learning what he did. Like a black belt up against a boxer. They may both be experts in their forms, but they fight in totally different ways.

And yes, the halia left as soon as the tasks were completed.

As for the romance, I (obviously) am leaving it open. I started the story thinking it would be Ginny, and I have to admit that I still think that that is the most likely thing for canon, but I have to think that Tonks would have just as much of a chance in my world. I decided not to do either, so that you can choose in your mind. Technically, for you H/H people, that could still work in my world as well, since Ron and Hermione aren't married, just dating... Now, see, we can all be happy...

I think that I mentioned somewhere that Harry's castle is roughly a hundred miles away from Hogwarts, pick a direction, any direction, 'cause I don't know.

I've implied without ever coming right out and saying it that the mysterious room in Harry's castle was a room of requirement.

Remus' animagus form... well, all Harry knows is that he's an animagus, not what he is, but yes the wolf would be the logical thing. Can't have a Moony without a howl, now can we?

Several people asked that the epilogue feature Hagrid. I have a confession to make. For the life of me I can't write Hagrid and have it come out right. Every time I try I managed to mix up his speech really really badly. Imagine a pirate/Yoda Irish brogue and you might have it. shudders And I can't stand it. So I don't write Hagrid.

Now for the bad news. From a lot of your reviews, I have been getting requests for a sequel. Unfortunately, as you may have gathered from my rather erratic update schedule recently, I hardly have enough time to start another story now. I won't say never, but for right now, I have to deal with some of the things real life is throwing at me. Actually I rather like the Redemption universe the way it is, with a lot of horizons opened up and plenty of room for imagination about the future. I will probably just leave it there. I do have some other unrelated story ideas, but I won't be pursuing them right away, and several of them aren't Harry Potter, so who knows...

That being said, I know that there are a lot of opportunities in the Redemption universe for one shot and fillers throughout the six years that Harry was in prison and the half a year of so spanning the story. If anyone wants to contact me via email with ideas, I would have no problem with someone else writing in my universe as long as the major points are adhered to. All I ask is that you let me know. I will be out of touch for about two weeks after posting this, but I'll get back to you after that.

Thank you again! This has been a real learning experience for me!

Signing off,

krtshadow